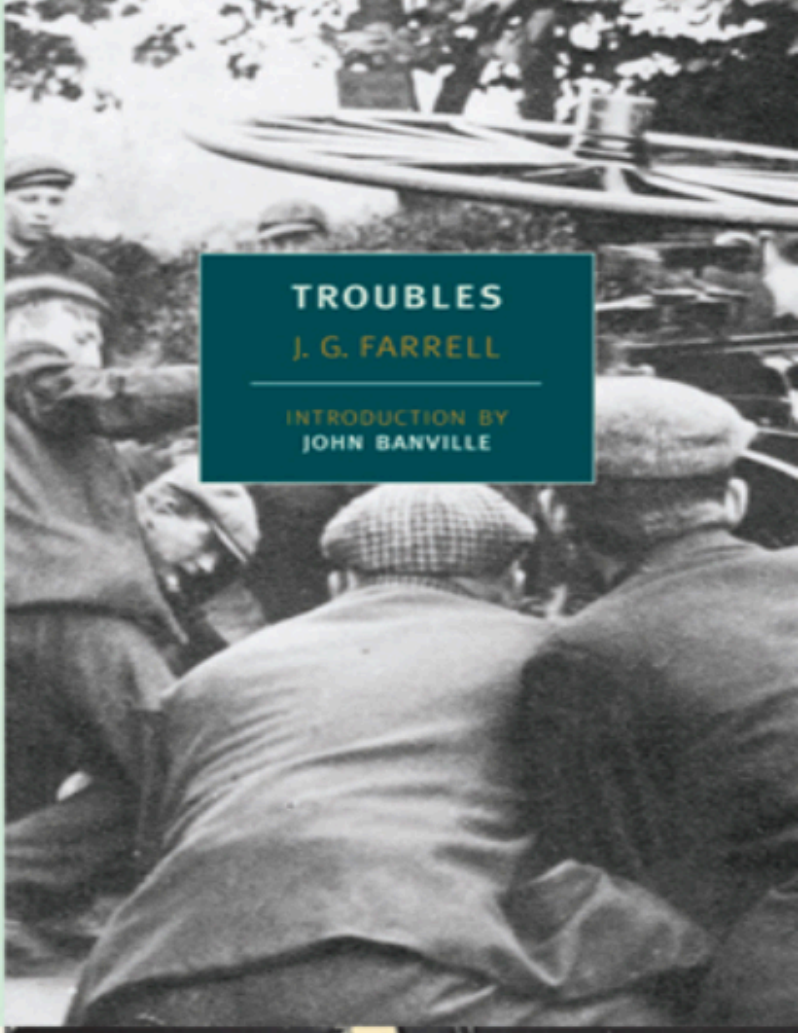
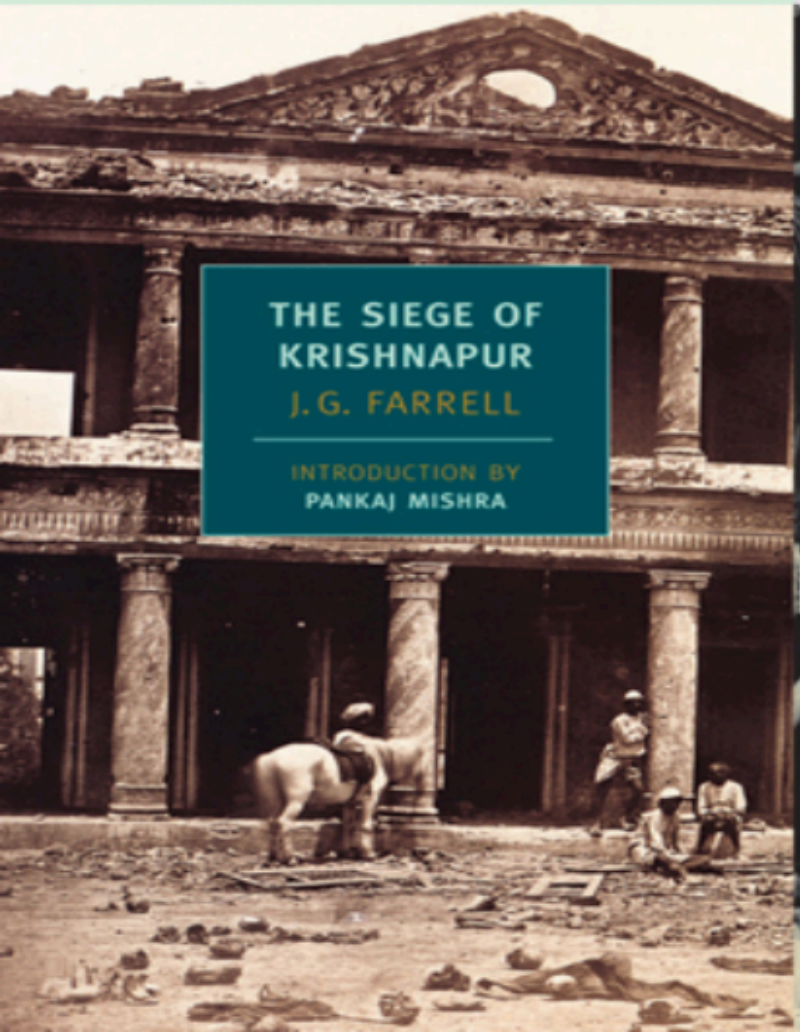
THE EMPIRE TRILOGY

by J. G. Farrell

TROUBLES
THE SIEGE OF KRISHNAPUR
THE SINGAPORE GRIP

nyrb CLASSICS





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Troubles

The Siege of Krishnapur

The Singapore Grip

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New York Review Books
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New York

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Introduction

In Derek Mahon's great poem *A Disused Shed in Co. Wexford*, a pair of travelers find themselves "Deep in the grounds of a burnt-out hotel, / Among the bathtubs and the washbasins"; forcing open a long-locked door, they come upon a host of mushrooms crowding in the darkness. They have been there, the poet imagines, for decades, waiting for the blessed light to break in upon their fetid, liminal world:

> "Save us, save us," they seem to say,
> "Let not the god abandon us
> Who have come so far in darkness and in pain.
> We too had our lives to live..."

The poem is a threnody for disappeared worlds—"Lost people of Treblinka and Pompeii!"—especially, although it does not mention it directly, the world of the Anglo-Irish aristocracy. This hardy strain, which had endured for some eight centuries, came to its sudden withering in the Irish War of Independence, which ended with the treaty signed between the British government and Michael Collins's I.R.A. in 1922. Under the treaty Ireland was partitioned, with twenty-six southern counties becoming a Free State, and the six northern counties remaining under British sovereignty. The result was civil war.

Effectively the country had been portioned out between the Protestants of the North and the Catholics of the South. It seemed at the time, to the bellicose Collins no less than to the British Prime Minister Lloyd George, the only possible solution to an insoluble problem. One of the results of partition was that in both the North and the South a religious minority was left to fend for itself as best it might among a more or less hostile majority. In the North, that fending continues to this day; in the South, the Protestants, some 5 percent of the population, largely withdrew from public life, a matter of bitter regret to many of the more perceptive among them, from W.B. Yeats—"We are no petty people!"—to Hubert Butler. Butler, an essayist of genius, never ceased to bemoan the loss to the life of Southern Ireland of that energy, intransigence, and often fierce radicalism which marked the Protestant tradition, especially in the North.

Mahon's poem is dedicated to his friend J.G. Farrell. Farrell was an elusive, intensely private man, something of an enigma not only to the reading public but to many of those who knew him well. His parentage was a mixture of Irish and English. He was born in Liverpool in 1935, and spent much of his youth in the Far East. In his first term at Oxford he was afflicted with polio, which left him with a partially disabled arm. Nevertheless he was extremely attractive—in looks he resembled, and indeed had something of the aloofly playful manner of, Marcel Duchamp—and had affairs with an impressive number of women, as Lavinia Greacen revealed in her 1999 biography. He wrote seven novels, the best-known of which are the three which comprise the so-called Empire Trilogy, The Siege of Krishnapur, The Singapore Grip, and Troubles.

In the spring of 1979, Farrell moved to Ireland, living in a cottage on a remote promontory in Bantry Bay. Four months later, in August, while fishing in stormy weather off rocks near the cottage, he was washed into the sea and drowned. His death at forty-four, a tragically early age, especially for a novelist, led to an inexplicable decline in his reputation. Had he lived, no doubt he would have done wonders, but even in the relatively short span of his career he erected an enduring literary monument, the capstone of which is Troubles. Although The Siege of Krishnapur won the Booker Prize in 1973, Troubles is surely his masterpiece, and the book of his that is certain to endure.

The "Troubles" of the title is the euphemism which the Irish—peasant, merchant, or Protestant aristo—applied to the ragged, sporadic, but brutal war that began in 1919 between Sinn Fein/I.R.A. and the British army of occupation. In fact, that war might be said to have started three years earlier, with the abortive Easter Rising of 1916, which lasted a week and ended with the summary execution of fourteen of its leaders. The uprising had been deeply unpopular among the majority of the Irish people—legend has it that lady passers-by belabored with their umbrellas the rebel force as it entered to occupy the General Post Office in Dublin on that Easter Monday morning—and both the English and the Anglo-Irish regarded it as a stab in the back by an ungrateful rabblement at a time when thousands of young men, many of them Irish, were dying in the defense of liberty in the killing fields of France. However, the haste and brutality of the exe- cutions of the leaders of the Rising provoked a surge of resentment among the native population that would not be asuaged until British rule was ended, at least in the Twenty-Six Counties.

Although Troubles, first published in 1970, was set fifty years previously, it was unintentionally well-timed, and uncannily prescient. That year saw the onset in bloody earnest of a new round of Troubles which at last, it is to be hoped, are coming to an end. In 1970, as in 1920, battle was joined between two mutually uncomprehending tribes; now, it was between the Catholic and Protestant working classes of Northern Ireland, with the British army in the middle; then, between the Catholic peasantry and the Protestant Ascendancy, with a force of British irregulars, the Black and Tans, supposedly set to keep the peace but in reality waging punitive retaliation against an elusive army of rebels.

In Troubles, Farrell catches with appalling accuracy the brutal yet peculiarly farcical nature of that war that was never quite a war. Nowhere in the book do we see a single live I.R.A. man; even when one of the central characters, Major Archer, is being buried up to his neck on a beach to await drowning by the incoming tide, the hands that dig the hole and place him in it are anonymous, and might from the description of their ministrations be in the act of saving him rather than attempting to murder him. When we do get a glimpse of a rebel, a dead one, it is in one of the novel's more gruesomely comic, closing scenes—the body of the young man has been laid out on a table in a gun room, where his executioner, Edward Spencer, lets his gaze wander around the trophies of wild animal heads on the paneled walls, and "for an instant the dreadful thought occurred to the Major that Edward had now gone completely insane and was looking for a place on the wall to mount the Sinn Feiner."

Edward Spencer—a name that will have an allusive echo for anyone who knows the history of Elizabethan Ireland— is one of the great comic portraits in modern literature. He is the proprietor, if that is the word, of the Majestic Hotel, a crumbling pile somewhere on the coast of County Wexford. It is to the Majestic that the haunted war veteran Major Archer comes, with wan reluctance, to claim Edward's daughter Angela as his bride. But Angela will not be wed, and as the weeks become months, and the months years, the Major lingers, an only faintly more vivid ghost among the hotel's ghostly guests, ancient ladies, for the most part, who have taken up permanent residence under the tottering former magnificence of the Majestic, along with a steadily burgeoning pack of half-wild cats which roam the upper stories like the building's bad dreams. Meanwhile Edward's surviving daughters, the terrible twins Faith and Charity—another wonderful, and curiously erotic, invention—are growing half-wild too, the staff and servants lurk like wood-sprites, the boy Padraig is turning transvestite, and Murphy the major-domo is going quietly but dangerously mad.

This may all sound like the cod-Gothic of Cold Comfort Farm or the deliciously cruel absurdities of early Evelyn Waugh, but Farrell's vision and voice are unique, inimitable. If there are faint echoes here, they are the most finely harmonious: Elizabeth Bowen's masterpiece, The Last September, perhaps Henry Green's hypnotic Loving. The tone of Troubles throughout is one of vague, helpless desperation, while the wit is dry to the point of snapping. Since the bulk of the action is seen through the Major's war-damaged sensibility, there is an air of permanent, pallid bafflement before the mundane mysteries of Irish life.

Yet the book is horridly, irresistibly, achingly funny, even, or especially, when it is at its most violent, or most poignant. The Major's doomed love for Sarah, the dissatisfied daughter of a—Catholic—banker in the nearby town of Kilnalough is at once heartbreaking and comic. Farrell's touch is robust yet delicate, and always sure. In the midst of a masterly set piece describing a ball at the Majestic which is meant to be grand but turns out grisly, there is a fleeting moment of exquisite sorrow when Sarah, bored with the Major's mutely pleading presence at her side, drops her eyes to her glass: "She flicked it idly with her finger-nail and drew from it one thin, clear note of a painful beauty, over which the honeyed sighings of the violins on the platform had no dominion."

If Troubles is the expression of the end of a world, it is one of the most finely modulated and magically comic whimpers the reader is ever likely to catch.

—JOHN BANVILLE

Part One: A Member of the Quality

In those days the Majestic was still standing in Kilnalough at the very end of a slim peninsula covered with dead pines leaning here and there at odd angles. At that time there were probably yachts there too during the summer since the hotel held a regatta every July. These yachts would have been beached on one or other of the sandy crescents that curved out towards the hotel on each side of the peninsula. But now both pines and yachts have floated away and one day the high tide may very well meet over the narrowest part of the peninsula, made narrower by erosion. As for the regatta, for some reason it was discontinued years ago, before the Spencers took over the management of the place. And a few years later still the Majestic itself followed the boats and preceded the pines into oblivion by burning to the ground—but by that time, of course, the place was in such a state of disrepair that it hardly mattered.

Curiously, in spite of the corrosive effect of the sea air the charred remains of the enormous main building are still to be seen; for some reason—the poor quality of the soil or the proximity of the sea—vegetation has only made a token attempt to possess them. Here and there among the foundations one might still find evidence of the Majestic's former splendour: the great number of cast-iron bathtubs, for instance, which had tumbled from one blazing floor to another until they hit the earth; twisted bed-frames also, some of them not yet altogether rusted away; and a simply prodigious number of basins and lavatory bowls. At intervals along the outer walls there is testimony to the stupendous heat of the fire: one can disinter small pools of crystal formed in layers like the drips of wax from a candle, which gathered there, of course, from the melting of the windows. Pick them up and they separate in your hand into the cloudy drops that formed them.

Another curious thing: one comes across a large number of tiny white skeletons scattered round about. The bones are very delicate and must have belonged, one would have thought, to small quadrupeds...("But no, not rabbits," says my grandfather with a smile.)

It had once been a fashionable place. It had once even been considered an honour to be granted accommodation there during the summer season. By the time Edward Spencer bought it on his return from India, however, it retained little or nothing of its former glory, even if it did retain some of its faithful guests of the year-by-year variety, maiden ladies for the most part. The only explanation for their continued patronage (since under Edward's management the hotel went swiftly and decisively to the dogs) is that as the hotel declined in splendour the maiden ladies became steadily more impoverished. In any event they could keep on saying: "Oh, the Majestic in Kilnalough? I've been going there every year since 1880..." and the man who sold the place to Edward could claim that he had, at least, his few faithful customers who kept coming every year without fail. In the end these faithful customers became something of a millstone for Edward (and later for the Major)—worse than no customers at all, since they had their habits of twenty years or more; the rooms they had been staying in for twenty years were dotted here and there over that immense building and, though whole wings and corners of it might be dead and decaying, there would still be a throbbing cell of life on this floor or that which had to be maintained. Slowly, though, as the years went by and the blood-pressure dropped, one by one they died away.

* * *

From the *London Gazette*, General List:

The undermentioned relinquishes his commission on completion of service, Temporary Major B. de S. Archer, and retains the rank of Major.

* * *

In the summer of 1919, not long before the great Victory Parade marched up Whitehall, the Major left hospital and went to Ireland to claim his bride, Angela Spencer. At least he fancied that the claiming of her as a bride might come into it. But nothing definite had been settled.

Home on leave in 1916 the Major had met Angela in Brighton where she had been staying with relations. He now only retained a dim recollection of that time, dazed as he was by the incessant, titanic thunder of artillery that cushioned it thickly, before and after. They had been somewhat hysterical —Angela perhaps feeling amid all the patriotism that she too should have something personal to lose, the Major that he should have at least one reason for surviving. He remembered declaring that he would come back to her, but not very much else. Indeed, the only other thing he recalled quite distinctly was saying goodbye to her at an afternoon *thé dansant* in a Brighton hotel. They had kissed behind a screen of leaves and, reaching out to steady himself, he had put his hand down firmly on a cactus, which had rendered many of his parting words insincere. The strain had been so great that he had been glad to get away from her. Perhaps, however, this suppressed agony had given the wrong impression of his feelings.

Although he was sure that he had never actually proposed to Angela during the few days of their acquaintance, it was beyond doubt that they were engaged: a certainty fostered by the fact that from the very beginning she had signed her letters “Your loving fiancée, Angela.” This had surprised him at first. But, with the odour of death drifting into the dug-out in which he scratched out his replies by the light of a candle, it would have been trivial and discourteous beyond words to split hairs about such purely social distinctions.

Angela was no good at writing letters. In them it would have been impossible to find any trace of the feeling there had been between them during his home leave of 1916. She had certain ritual expressions such as “Every day I miss you more and more—” and “I am praying for your safe return, Brendan” which she used in every letter, combined with entirely factual descriptions of domestic matters: the buying of skirts for the twins in Switzers of Dublin, for example, or the installation of a “Do More” generator for electric light, the first of its kind in Ireland and destined (they were sure) to restore the Majestic’s reputation for luxury. Any personal comment, any emotion was efficiently masked out by this method. The Major did not particularly mind. He was wary of sentiment and had always had a relish for facts—of which, these days, his badly rattled memory was in short supply (in hospital he had been recovering from shell-shock). So on the whole he was glad to learn the size and colour of the twins’ new skirts or the name, breed, age and condition of health of Edward Spencer’s many dogs. He also learned a great deal about Angela’s friends and acquaintances in Kilnalough, though sometimes, of course, his defective memory would cause whole blocks of facts to submerge for a while, only to reappear somewhere else later on, rather like certain volcanic islands are reputed to do in the South Seas.

After he had been receiving a letter a week for a number of months he acquired a remarkable skill for reading these letters and totting up the new facts, even sometimes peering past them into the lower depths where the shadow of an emotion occasionally stirred like a pike. There would be a list of Edward’s dogs again, for example: Rover, Toby, Fritz, Haig, Woof, Puppy, Bran, Flash, Laddie, Foch and Collie. But where, he would wonder, is Spot? Where are you, Spot? Why have you failed to answer the roll-call? And then he would remember, half amused and half concerned, that in an earlier letter the vet had been called because Spot had had “a touch of distemper” but had pronounced it “nothing serious.” In this way, thread by thread, he embroidered for himself a colourful tapestry of Angela’s life at the Majestic. Soon he knew the place so well that when he went there at the beginning of July he almost felt as if he were going home. And this was fortunate because by this time, except for an elderly aunt in Bayswater, he had no family of his own to go to.

On leaving hospital he had paid a visit to this aunt. She was a meek and kindly old lady and he was fond of her, having grown up in her house. She hugged him tightly with tears in her eyes, dismayed at how much he had changed, how thin and pale he had become, but afraid to say anything for fear of annoying him. She had invited some of her friends to tea to welcome him home, feeling no doubt that a young man returning from the war deserved more of a welcome than a solitary old lady was able to provide. At first the Major appeared put out to discover her house full of guests holding teacups, but then, to the old lady’s relief, he became very cheerful and talkative, talked gaily with everyone, leaped around with plates of cakes and sandwiches and laughed a great deal. Her guests, alarmed at first by this gaiety, soon became enchanted with him and for a while everything went splendidly. Presently, however, she missed him and after looking for him everywhere finally came upon him sitting by himself in a deserted drawing-room. There was a bitter, weary expression in his eyes that she had never seen before. But what else could one expect? she wondered. He must have been through horrors that peaceful old ladies (such as herself) might not even begin to comprehend. But he was alive, thank heaven, and he would get better. Tactfully she withdrew and left him to his thoughts. And in a little while he returned to the tea-party once more and seemed perfectly cheerful, his moment of bitterness amid the silent, hooded furniture forgotten.

The Major, of course, was aware that he was distressing his aunt by his odd behaviour. He was annoyed with himself, but for a while found improvement difficult. When on another occasion, hoping to divert him, she invited some young ladies to tea he dismayed everyone by the hungry attention with which he stared at their heads, their legs, their arms. He was thinking: “How firm and solid they look, but how easily they come away from the body!” And the tea in his cup tasted like bile.

And there was yet another thing that disturbed his aunt: he declined to visit any of his former friends. The company of people he knew had become abhorrent to him. These days he was only at ease in the company of strangers—which made the thought of a visit to his “fiancée” doubly welcome. It was true, of course, that he was slightly uneasy as he set off for Ireland. He was about to be plunged into a circle of complete strangers. What if Angela turned out to be insufferable but insisted on marrying him? Moreover, his nerves were in a poor state. What if the family turned out to be objectionable? However, it’s hard to be intimidated by people when one knows, for instance, the nature and amount of the dental work in their upper and lower jaws, where they buy their outer clothes (Angela had delicately omitted to mention underwear) and many more things besides.

* * *

TROTSKY’S THREAT TO KRONSTADT

The situation in Petrograd is desperate. According to a manifesto issued by the Soviet, the evacuation of the city is going on with nervous eagerness. Trotsky has ordered that Kronstadt shall be blown up before it is surrendered.

* * *

It was the early afternoon of July 1st, 1919, and the Major was comfortably seated in a train travelling south from Kingstown along the coast of Wicklow. He had folded his newspaper in such a way as to reveal that in Boston Mr De Valera, speaking about the peace treaty signed the day before yesterday, had said that it made twenty new wars in the place of one nominally ended. The Major, however, merely yawned at this dire prediction and looked at his watch. They would shortly be arriving in Kilnalough. In Kingstown Theda Bara was appearing as Cleopatra, he noted, Tom Mix was at the Grafton Picture House, while at the Tivoli there was a juggler "of almost unique legerdemain." Another headline caught his eye: SATURDAY NIGHT'S SCENES IN DUBLIN. IRISH GIRLS SPAT UPON AND BEATEN. A party of twenty or thirty Irish girls, assistants of the Women's Royal Air Force at Gormanstown, had been attacked by a hostile crowd... jostled, maltreated, slapped all along the street. Whatever for? wondered the Major. But he had dozed off before finding the answer.

"As a matter of fact, it is," the Major was now saying to his fellow-passengers, "though I'm sure it won't be my last. To tell the truth, I'm going to be married to a...an Irish girl." He wondered whether Angela would be pleased to be described as "an Irish girl."

Ah, sure, they smiled back at him. So that was it. Indeed now one might have known, they beamed, there was more to it than a holiday, sure there was. And God bless now and a long life and a happy one...

The Major stood up, delighted with their friendliness, and the gentlemen stood up too to help him wrestle his heavy pigskin suitcase out of the luggage net, patting him on the back and repeating their good wishes while the ladies grinned shyly at the thought of a wedding.

The train rattled over a bridge. Below the Major glimpsed smoothly running water, the amber tea colour of so many streams in Ireland. On each side mounted banks of wild flowers woven into the long gleaming grass. They slowed to a crawl and jolted over some points. The banks dived steeply and they were running along beside a platform. The Major looked round expectantly, but there was nobody there to meet him. Angela's letter had said without fuss, factual as ever, that he would be met. And the train (he looked at his watch again) was even a few minutes late. There was something about Angela's neat, regular handwriting that made what she wrote impossible to disbelieve.

A few minutes passed and he had almost given up hope of anyone coming when a young man appeared diffidently on the platform. He had a plump, round face and the way he carried his head on one side gave him a sly air. After some hesitation he approached, holding out his hand to the Major.

"You must be Angela's chap? I'm dreadfully sorry I'm late. I was supposed to meet you and so on." Having shaken the Major's hand, he retrieved his own and scratched his head with it. "By the way, I'm Ripon. I expect you've heard about me."

"As a matter of fact I haven't."

"Oh? Well, I'm Angela's brother."

Angela, who recorded her life in detail, had never mentioned having a brother. Disconcerted, the Major followed Ripon out of the station and threw his suitcase, which Ripon had not offered to carry, on to the back of the waiting trap before climbing up after it. Ripon took the reins, shook them, and they lurched off down a winding unpaved street. He was wearing, the Major noted, a well-cut tweed suit that needed pressing; he could also have done with a clean collar.

"This is Kilnalough," Ripon announced awkwardly after they had ridden in silence for a while. "A wonderful little town. A splendid place, really."

"I suppose you've lived here some time," the Major said, trying to account for Ripon's absence from his sister's letters. "I mean, you haven't recently returned from abroad?"

"Abroad?" Ripon glanced at him suspiciously. "Not really, no. I'm afraid I haven't." He cleared his throat. "I suppose the smell of the place seems strange to you, turf-smoke and cows and so on." He added: "I know Angela's looking forward to seeing you. I mean, we all are...jolly pleased."

The Major looked round at the whitewashed walls and slate roofs of Kilnalough; here and there, silent men and women stood in doorways or sat on doorsteps watching them pass. One or two of the older men touched their caps.

"It's a splendid town," repeated Ripon. "You'll soon get used to it. On the right a little farther down is the Munster and Leinster Bank...on the left O'Meara's grocery and then the fish shop, we're near the sea, you know...beyond, where the street bends, is the chapel of Our Lady Queen of Heaven, fish-eater, of course...and then there's O'Connell's, the second best pork-butcher's..." Curiously, however, they passed none of these places. The Major, at least, could see no trace of them.

They were now on the outskirts of Kilnalough; here there was little to see except a few wretched stone cottages with ragged, barefoot children playing in front of them, hens picking among the refuse, an odour of decaying vegetation in the air. Reaching the top of an incline they saw the dull sparkle of the sea above a quilt

of meadows and hedges. The smell of brine hung heavily in the air.

Abruptly Ripon was in good spirits, almost jubilant (perhaps even a little drunk? wondered the Major) and kept recognizing landmarks of his childhood. Pointing at the middle of a flat, empty field he told the Major that that was where he had flown his first kite; in a hawthorn hedge he had once shot a rabbit as big as a bulldog; in the barn over there he had had a rewarding experience with the peasant girl who in those days used to be cast in the role of the Virgin Mary every year for the Christmas pageant mounted by Finnegan's Drapery Limited...and yes, in the copse that lay on the other side of the barn young Master Ripon, watched by all the servants and all "the quality" from miles around, had been daubed with the blood of the fox (a not dissimilar experience, he added cryptically)...and on this very road...

Not far away the two massive, weatherworn gateposts of the Majestic rose out of the impenetrable foliage that lined the sea side of the road. As they passed between them (the gates themselves had vanished, leaving only the skeletons of the enormous iron hinges that had once held them) the Major took a closer look: each one was surmounted by a great stone ball on which a rain-polished stone crown was perched slightly askew, lending the gateposts a drunken, ridiculous air, like solemn men in paper hats. To the right of the drive stood what had once no doubt been a porter's lodge, now so thickly bearded in ivy that only the two dark oblongs of smashed windows revealed that this leafy mass was hollow. The thick congregation of deciduous trees, behind which one could hear the sea slapping faintly, thinned progressively into pines as they made their way over the narrowest part of the peninsula and then returned again as they reached the park over which loomed the dark mass of the hotel. The size of the place astonished the Major. As they approached he looked up at the great turreted wall hanging over them and tried to count the balconies and windows (behind one of which his "fiancée" was perhaps watching for his approach).

Ripon brought the trap to a halt and, when the Major had alighted, kicked his suitcase off the back on to the gravel (causing the Major to wince at the thought of the fragile bottles of cologne and macassar that it contained). Then without getting down himself he shook the reins and moved away, calling that he had to take the pony round to the stable but that the Major should go ahead without him, up those steps and in through the front door. So the Major picked up his suitcase and started towards the flight of stone steps, pausing on his way to inspect a life-size statue of a plump lady on horseback, stained green by the weather. This lady and her discreetly prancing horse were familiar to him from Angela's letters. It was Queen Victoria, and she, at least, was exactly as he had expected.

The Major had considered it possible that his "fiancée" would be waiting to embrace him inside the front door, a massive affair of carved oak which was so heavy that it was by no means easy to drag open. There was no sign of her, however.

In the foyer at the foot of the vast flowing staircase there stood another statue, this time of Venus; a dark shading of dust had collected on her head and shoulders and on the upper slopes of marble breasts and buttocks. The Major screwed up his eyes in a weary, nervous manner and looked round at the shabby magnificence of the foyer, at the dusty gilt cherubs, red plush sofas and grimy mirrors.

"Where can everyone be?" he wondered. Nobody appeared, so he sat down on one of the sofas with his suitcase between his knees. A fine cloud of dust rose around him.

After a while he got to his feet and found a bell on the reception desk which he rang. The sound echoed over the dusty tiled floor and down gloomy carpeted corridors and away through open double-leafed doors into lounges and bars and smoking-rooms and upwards into spiral after spiral of the broad staircase (from which a number of brass stair-rods had disappeared, causing the carpet to bulge dangerously in places) until it reached the maids' quarters and rang in the vault high above his head (so high that he could scarcely make out the elegant gilt tracery that webbed it); from this vault there was suspended on an immensely long chain, back down the middle of the many spirals from one floor to another to within a few inches of his head, a great glass chandelier studded with dead electric bulbs. One of the glass tassels chimed faintly for a brief moment beside his ear. Then all was silent again except for the steady tick-tock of an ancient pendulum clock over the reception desk showing the wrong time.

"I suppose I'd better give this gong a clout," he told himself. And he did so. A thunderous boom filled the silence. It grew, he could feel it growing throughout the house like a hugely swelling fruit that would burst out of all the windows. He shuddered and thought of the first moments of a heavy barrage before a "show." "I'm tired," he thought. "Why don't they come?"

But presently a plump, rosy-cheeked maid appeared and asked if he would be the Major Archer? Miss Spencer was expecting him in the Palm Court. The Major abandoned his suitcase and followed her down a dark corridor, vaguely apprehensive of this long-delayed reunion with his "fiancée." "Oh, she won't bite!" he told himself cheerfully. "At least, one supposes she won't..." But his heart continued to thump nevertheless.

The Palm Court proved to be a vast, shadowy cavern in which dusty white chairs stood in silent, empty groups, just visible here and there amid the gloomy foliage. For the palms had completely run riot, shooting out of their wooden tubs (some of which had cracked open to trickle little cones of black soil on to the tiled floor) towards the distant murky skylight, hammering and interweaving themselves against the greenish glass that sullenly glowed overhead. Here and there between the tables beds of oozing mould supported banana and

rubber plants, hairy ferns, elephant grass and creepers that dangled from above like emerald intestines. In places there was a hollow ring to the tiles—there must be some underground irrigation system, the Major reasoned, to provide water for all this vegetation. But now, here he was.

At one of the tables Angela was waiting to greet him with a wan smile and the hope that he had had a good journey. His first impression was one of disappointment. The gloom here was so thick that it was difficult for the Major to see quite what she looked like, but (whatever she looked like) he was somewhat taken aback by the formality of her greeting. He might have been nothing more than a casual guest for bridge. Of course it was true, as he hastened to point out to himself, that their meeting had been both brief and a long time ago. As far as he could make out she was older then he had expected and wore a fatigued air. Though apparently too exhausted to rise she held out a thin hand to be squeezed. The Major, however, not yet having had time to adjust himself to this real Angela, seized it eagerly and brushed it with his shaggy blond moustache, causing her to flinch a little. Then he was introduced to the other guests: an extremely old gentleman called Dr Ryan who was fast asleep in an enormous padded armchair (and consequently failed to acknowledge his presence), a solicitor whose name was Boy O'Neill, his wife, a rather grim lady, and their daughter Viola.

The foliage, the Major continued to notice as he took his seat, was really amazingly thick; there were creepers not only dangling from above but also running in profusion over the floor, leaping out to seize any unwary object that remained in one place for too long. A standard lamp at his elbow, for instance, had been throttled by a snake of greenery that had circled up its slender metal stem as far as the black bulb that crowned it like a bulging eyeball. It had no shade and the bulb he assumed to be dead until, to his astonishment, Angela fumbled among the dusty leaves and switched it on, presumably so that she could take a good look at him. Whether or not she was dismayed by what she saw she switched it off again with a sigh after a moment and the gloom returned. Meanwhile the Major was thinking: "So *that* was what she looked like in Brighton three years ago, of course, now I remember"; but to tell the truth he only half remembered her; she was half herself and half some stranger, but neither half belonged to the image he had had of her while reading her weekly letter (an image he had been thinking of marrying, incidentally—better not forget that this fatigued lady was his "fiancée").

"Did you have a good crossing, Brendan?" she was inquiring. "That boat can be so tiresome when it's rough."

"Yes, thank you, though I can't deny I was glad when we got into Kingstown. Have you been well, Angela?"

"Ah, I've been dying"—a fit of weary coughing interrupted her—"of boredom," she added peevishly.

Meanwhile, without taking her eyes off the Major's face she had stretched out a leg under the table and begun a curious exercise with it, grunting slightly with the effort, as if trying to tread some slow-moving but resilient beetle into the tiled floor. "Is she trying to find my foot?" wondered the Major, perplexed. Then at last, after this curious spasm had continued for a few moments (the O'Neills were either accustomed to it or pretended not to notice), a distant bell rang somewhere away in the jungle of palms. Angela's leg relaxed, an expression of satisfaction appeared on her pallid, fretful features, and an aged and uncouth manservant (whom the Major for a moment mistook for his prospective father-in-law) shambled out of the jungle breathing hard through his mouth as if he had just had some frightful experience in the scullery.

"Tea, Murphy."

"Yes, Mum."

Angela switched on the lamp long enough for Murphy to collect some empty cups in his trembling hands, then turned it off again. The Major noticed that old Dr Ryan was not asleep as he had supposed. Beneath the drooping lids his eyes were bright with interest and intelligence.

"I wish we could trust *ours*," Mrs O'Neill was saying.

"It is a problem," agreed Angela. "What do you think, Doctor?"

Dr Ryan ignored her question, however, and silence descended once more.

"In a lot of ways they're like children," Boy O'Neill said at length and his wife assented. "What an extraordinarily inert tea-party!" thought the Major, who had become aware of a keen hunger and looked up hopefully at the sound of a step. But it was only Ripon, sliding apologetically into a chair beside Mrs O'Neill.

"Did you wash your hands, Ripon?" asked Angela. "After that horse."

"Yes, yes, yes," replied Ripon, smiling furtively across at the Major and lounging back in a self-consciously casual manner. A moment later he threw a leg over the arm of his chair, narrowly missing Mrs O'Neill's face with his shoe (which had the wandering contours of a hole worn in the sole). "Where are the twins?"

"They've gone to spend a week in Tipperary with friends from school. But one wonders whether the roads are really safe these days."

"Trees have been felled on the road to Wexford. It really can't go on. Three policemen killed in Kilcatherine. The *Irish Times* said this morning that a levy of six shillings in the pound has been put on the whole electoral division. That should make them think twice." Mr O'Neill spoke with the fluted vowels of an Ulsterman; his drawn, yellowish face had reminded the Major of the fact (recorded in Angela's letters) that the Spencer family solicitor was thought to be ill with cancer, had been up to Dublin to see specialists, had even travelled to London to see doctors there. Though the verdict had been omitted from Angela's letters to the Major, this omission was eloquent. Death. The man was dying here in the Palm Court as he nervously discussed the abomination of Sinn Fein.

“Those who live by the sword...” said Mrs O’Neill.

“Ah, more tea,” exclaimed Angela as Murphy once more appeared out of the jungle like some weary, breathless gorilla, pushing the tea-trolley. Mustard-and-cress sandwiches. The Major took one and cut it in half with a small, scimitar-shaped tea-knife. Weak with hunger, he put one half in his mouth, then the other. They both vanished almost before his teeth had had time to close on them. His hunger increased as he took another sandwich from the plate, ate it, and then took another. It was all he could do to restrain himself from taking two at a time. Fortunately it was now getting quite dark in the Palm Court (though still only mid-afternoon) and perhaps nobody noticed.

Meanwhile Angela (who had once, so she said, sat on the lap of the Viceroy) had begun to talk languidly about her childhood in Ireland and India, then with a little more energy about the glories of her youth in London society. Soon she became quite animated and the tea grew cold in the cups of her guests. Ripon, while champagne was being quaffed out of his sister’s slippers, kept catching the Major’s eye and winking as if to say: Here she goes again! But Angela either failed to notice or paid no attention.

Handsome young rowing Blues in full evening dress plunged into the Isis or the Cam at a word from her. Chandeliers were swung from. Her hand was kissed by distinguished statesmen and steady-eyed explorers and ancient pre-Raphaelite poets and God only knew who else, while Boy O’Neill sucked his moustache and grunted in surprise and alarm at each fresh act of immoderation and his wife took on a primly disbelieving look, rather hard about the mouth, as if to say that not everyone can be taken in by all the nonsense they hear; while Ripon smirked and winked and Dr Ryan appeared to doze, motionless with age. The Major listened with amazement; never would he have suspected that this was the same person (part girl, part old maid) who had written him so many precise and factual letters, filled as they were with an invincible reality as hard as granite. Angela talked on and on excitedly while the Major pondered this new facet of his “fiancée’s” character. At the same time, with the gloom thickening into a mysterious, tropical night, he guiltily wolfed the entire plate of sandwiches. At last it was so dark that the light had to be switched on, which brought everyone back to earth with a bump. The sparkle slowly faded from Angela’s eyes. She looked tired, harassed and ordinary once more.

“Ah, things were different before the war. You could buy a good bottle of whiskey for four and sixpence,” Mr O’Neill said. “It was those beastly women that started the rot.”

“They took advantage of their sex,” his wife agreed. “They blew up a house that Lloyd George was going to move into. They damaged the Coronation Chair. They dug up the greens of many lovely golf-courses and burned people’s letters. Is that a way for a woman to behave? It never pays to give in to such people. If it hadn’t been for the war....”

“...In which the women of England jolly well pulled their weight in the boat, more than their weight, I take my hat off to them. They deserved the vote. But the British public doesn’t give in to violence. They didn’t then and they won’t now. Take that Derby in which the woman killed herself. The King’s horse was lying fifth and was probably out of the running...but if Craiganour had fallen the anger of England would have been terrible to behold.”

Abruptly the Major noticed that Viola O’Neill, whose long hair was plaited into childish pigtails, who wore some kind of grey tweed school uniform, and who could scarcely have been more than sixteen years of age (plump and pretty though she was), was nevertheless looking him straight in the eye in a meaningful way. Embarrassed, he dropped his gaze to the empty plate in front of him.

As for Ripon, he was plainly bored. He had resumed a more orthodox sitting position and, with legs crossed, was tapping experimentally at his knee reflex with a teaspoon. The Major watched him drowsily. Now that he had eaten he was finding it an agony to stay awake and at the same time was pain-fully aware of being hunted by Miss O’Neill’s importunate eyes. Fortunately, just as he was feeling unable to resist for a moment longer some overpoweringly sedative remarks that Boy O’Neill was making about his schooldays, there was a diversion. A large, fierce-looking man in white flannels stepped from behind a luxuriant fern at which the Major had happened to be looking with drugged eyes. He said: “Quick, you chaps! Some unsavoury characters have been spotted lurking in the grounds. Probably Shinners.”

The tea-drinkers goggled at him.

“Quick!” he repeated, twitching a tennis racket in his right hand. “They’re probably looking for guns. Ripon, Boy, arm yourselves and follow me. You too, Major, delighted to make your acquaintance, I know you’ll want to be in on this. Come on, Boy, you’re not too old for a scrap!”

In the semi-darkness the old doctor stirred imperceptibly.

“Damn fool!” he muttered.

The fierce man in flannels was Angela’s father Edward, of course. There was no mistaking that stiff, craggy face with its accurately clipped moustache and broken nose (at least not for the Major, who had studied his daughter’s letters so assiduously). The broken nose, for example, was the result of having boxed for Trinity in a bout against the notorious Kevin Clinch, a Roman Catholic and a Gaelic speaker whose merciless fists had been a byword in those days (so Angela said, anyway). The savage Clinch (the Major remembered with a chuckle), mouthing incomprehensible oaths through his bleeding lips, had got as good as he gave, until he had

finally succeeded in flattening “Father” with a lucky punch. Time and again the elder Spencer had been battered to the canvas, time and again he had risen to demonstrate English pluck and tenacity against the superior might of his Celtic adversary. The Major imagined him stretched out at last, his fists still twitching automatically like the limbs of a decapitated chicken. What difference had it made that Edward had ended the contest horizontal and motionless in spite of all his efforts? Why, none at all. He had proved his point. Besides, the game’s the thing, it doesn’t matter who wins. Besides, Clinch was a stone heavier.

As he followed the others down a corridor the Major noticed Edward’s ears, which he also knew about—that is, he knew why they were so remarkably flattened against his skull, the reason being his mother’s horror of ears which stuck out. They had been taped back against his skull throughout his childhood, an intervention which the Major considered to have been a happy one. The rugged forehead, the heavy brows, the stony set of the jaw would have been too harsh if they had not been countered by those winsomely folded ears. But Edward turned at this moment and glanced back at the Major, who saw in his eyes a mildness and intelligence, even a hint of mockery, that did not go at all with his leonine features. For a moment he even suspected that Edward had divined his thoughts...but now they had reached Edward’s study, a room smelling strongly of dogs, leather and tobacco. It turned out to contain a staggering amount of sporting equipment piled haphazardly on an ancient chaise-longue scarred with bulging horsehair wounds. Shotguns and cricket stumps were stacked indiscriminately with fishing-rods, squash and tennis rackets (excellent ones made by Gray, Russell’s of Portarlington), odd tennis shoes and mildewed cricket bats.

“Take your pick. More in the gun room if those won’t do. You’ll find the ammo over there.” Edward pointed at a drawer which had been removed from a sideboard and was lying on the floor beside the empty, blackened grate. A huge and shaggy Persian cat was asleep on the pile of scarlet cartridges it contained, scarcely bothering to open its yellow eyes as it was lifted away and deposited on a brass-mounted elephant’s foot.

By now they had been joined by two or three other men in white flannels who were also rummaging for ammunition to suit their respective firearms; evidently a tennis match had been in progress. The Major, who had no intention of shooting anyone on his first day in Ireland if he could possibly avoid it, tugged dubiously at a .22 rifle which had become entangled with a waterproof wader, a warped tennis racket and hopelessly tangled coils of fishing-line. Ripon, meanwhile, had discovered a plumed cocked hat on the mantelpiece and having shaken a cloud of dust from it was adjusting it in front of a mirror. He then removed one of a pair of crossed rapiers from the wall and stuck it through the buttoned arch of his braces. This done, he picked up a javelin he found standing in the corner behind the door and began to tease the cat with it.

“Oh, for God’s sake, Ripon!” muttered Edward testily. And then: “If everyone’s ready we’ll sally forth.”

“How incredibly Irish it all is!” thought the Major wonderingly. “The family seems to be completely mad.”

A tall, stout man in a dark-green uniform with a shiny black leather belt was standing in the foyer, picking his nose and looking abstractedly at the white marble bottom of the Venus figure. He stared in surprise at Edward, who was still holding the tennis racket in one hand but now brandished a service revolver in the other, as if about to take part in some complicated gladiatorial combat. He shifted his gaze from Edward to the men in white flannels with shotguns broken over their arms. Nor did he seem reassured by the appearance of Ripon with his javelin and plumed hat.

“All right, Sergeant. Just show us where you think the blighters may be lurking.” The sergeant indicated respectfully that all he wanted to do was use the telephone; the men might be dangerous.

“All the better. We’re more than a match for them. Now, tell me what makes you think they’re hanging around here...” And Edward put a paternal hand on the sergeant’s shoulder and steered him out on to the sunlit drive.

As the makeshift white-flannelled army straggled chuckling towards the trees someone drawled: “I suppose we should be asking if the womenfolk are safe.”

“They’re safe when you aren’t around, anyway,” came the reply and everyone laughed cheerfully. Ripon had attached himself to the Major and had begun to tell him about a curious incident that had occurred at a tennis party not far away at Valebridge a few days earlier. A heavily armed bicycle patrol had surprised two suspicious individuals (no doubt Sinn Feiners) tampering with the canal bridge. One of them had fled across the fields and made good his escape. The other, who had a bicycle and was disinclined to leave it, had been confident that he could outpedal the Royal Irish Constabulary. Although for the first fifty yards the fugitive, pedalling desperately, had swerved to and fro in front of the peelers almost within grabbing range, he had then slowly pulled away. By the time they had slowed their pursuit to draw their revolvers the Sinn Feiner had increased his lead to almost a hundred yards. He slowed too, however, when the first shots began to whistle round his ears and had possibly even decided to give himself up when disaster struck the pursuers. One of the constables had removed both hands from the handlebars in order to take a steady, two-handed aim at the cyclist ahead. Unfortunately, just as he was squeezing the trigger he had veered wildly, colliding with his companions. The result was that all three had taken a nasty fall. As they had painfully got to their feet and dusted themselves off, expecting to see their quarry vanishing over the brow of the hill, they saw to their surprise that he too was slowing down. They hurriedly straightened their handlebars and, standing on the pedals to accelerate, sped towards the Sinn Feiner; the chain had come off his bicycle. Instead of awaiting capture he had abandoned his bicycle and fled into the drive of the house where the tennis party was going

on. What a shock the tennis players and spectators had got when all of a sudden a shabbily dressed young man had sped out of the shrubbery and across the court to gallop full tilt into the wire netting (which he evidently hadn't seen)! Under the impact he had crumpled to his knees. But though he seemed stunned, almost immediately he began to pull himself up by gripping the wire links with his fingers. Then someone had hurled a tennis ball at him. He had turned round as if surprised to see so many faces watching him. Then another tennis ball had been thrown, and another. At this the man had come to his senses and veered along the netting in search of an opening. Not finding one he had leaped up and clung to the netting to drag himself upwards. But by now every-one was on their feet hurling tennis balls. Then one of the women had joined in, throwing an empty glass but he still managed to pull himself up. Someone (Ripon thought it might have been old Dr Ryan, the "senile old codger" they had been having tea with) had shouted for them to stop. But nobody paid any attention. A tennis racket went revolving through the air and only missed by inches. Someone tore off his tennis shoes and threw them, one of them hitting the fugitive in the small of the back. He had paused now to gather strength. Then he was climbing again. A beer bottle shattered against one of the steel supports beside his head and a heavy walking-shoe struck him on the arm. Then, at last, a racket press had gone spinning through the air to hit him on the back of the head. He had dropped like a sack of potatoes and lay there unconscious. But when the breathless, red-faced peelers had finally arrived panting to arrest their suspect it was to find the tennis players and their wives still hurling whatever they could find at the prone and motionless Sinn Feiner...

"Good heavens!" exclaimed the Major. "What an incredible story! Frankly, I find it a bit hard to believe that people would throw things at an unconscious man. Did you see all this happen yourself?"

"Well, no, I wasn't actually present. But I've spoken to a lot of people who were there and...but what I wanted to say..."

"I must ask Dr Ryan, the 'senile old codger' as you call him."

"But I haven't finished," cried Ripon. "The thing is, it turned out later that this fellow wasn't a Shinner at all. He was just repairing the bridge with another workman."

"Ah, but that's absurd," the Major began. "Why should they be running away if they weren't...?" But Ripon's attention had been diverted and he was no longer listening. With a contemptuous smile he was watching his father lead the way into the cedar grove, beyond which the "unsavoury characters" were thought to have been seen (though by whom was still unclear to the Major).

Revolver and tennis racket at the ready, Edward had now reached the broken wall of loose stones that separated the cedar grove from the orchard. The orchard was a large one (there was an even bigger one on the other side of the road and in better condition, the breathless and yellow-faced O'Neill had just informed the Major), thickly planted and stretching over almost three acres from the kitchen garden to the road; at one time this orchard alone must have provided a great harvest of fruit, but for some years the trees had gone without pruning; consequently the apples were left for the most part sunless, shrivelled and bitter on trees that had grown as thick as hedges.

Edward was looking around cautiously. He stepped over the wall. There was a rustle in the undergrowth. He fired two deafening shots. A rabbit flew away, careering wildly through the trees. A man in flannels at Edward's side snapped shut his shotgun and fired both barrels. The noise made the Major's stomach lurch. It was the first time in months that he had heard gun-fire.

The sergeant was looking dismayed but helpless as Edward stepped back over the wall, smiling.

"Both missed. No shifty individuals in the undergrowth. Perhaps we'd better have a look through the out-houses just to make sure, though." He led the way through the orchard and into the kitchen garden which was protected from the north-easterly wind by a high wall. A number of cabbage whites fluttered peacefully here and there in the late afternoon sunlight, but there was no other sign of life. One by one they trailed through potting-sheds, a laundry house, a small conservatory glowing with ripe red tomatoes, the apple house (in which great mounds of green apples had been piled almost to the ceiling without any apparent thought for their preservation), an empty barn, the garages which housed a Daimler and a Standard, empty stables with feed-boxes still stuffed with dusty straw...and then they straggled back again into the sunshine.

"Let's finish that set," one of the men in flannels said. "I think the whole thing was just a bally ruse of Edward's to avoid facing my deadly serve."

The party disintegrated. While the tennis players strolled back to the courts, unloading their guns, the policeman continued, though somewhat resentfully, to poke through the buildings that had already been searched. The Major was uncertain what to do: should he return to his "fiancée's" side? Perhaps by now the tea-party would be over and a tête-à-tête would be possible. He lingered with Ripon, however, and accompanied him to retrieve the javelin which he had just hurled at a mudstained plaster nymph arising incongruously from a bed of cabbages. It had missed the nymph's plump stomach by a few inches and transfixed a giant cabbage a few feet farther on.

"I say, Edward," a voice floated back to them. "I don't think much of your local sleuths." The sergeant, who had just emerged from a second inspection of the barn, avoided the Major's eye.

Coming to the edge of the orchard at a point where the drive touched it at a tangent, the Major saw a girl

in a wheelchair. She was holding up two heavy walking-sticks and trying to use them as pincers to grasp a large green apple that hung out of her reach. Ripon hesitated when he saw her and whispered “Oh Lord, she’s seen us. She’s absolutely poisonous.”

“Don’t go away,” the girl called. As they approached she added: “My name is Sarah. I know who you are: you’re Angela’s Major and you’ve just arrived from England for a holiday.” “Ah, for a holiday?” wondered the Major.

“You see, I know everything that goes on...including everything about Ripon, don’t I, Ripon? Everything about what young Ripon has been up to in Kilnalough recently. He’s like an evil little cherub, don’t you think so, Major, with those round cheeks and curly hair.”

“You’re cruel,” the Major said lightly. And though her eyes were clear and grey and the backs of her hands sunburned (which suggested that she might be rather modern) and her hair dark, shining and very long, dividing round her nape and falling over her chest, and though she was quite beautiful, all things considered, the Major thought that perhaps Ripon was right and she was, as he had said, poisonous.

“One of the things I know about Ripon is that he constantly tells lies, isn’t that so, Ripon? He even tells lies to innocent young girls who don’t know any better than to believe him, that’s true, isn’t it, Ripon? No, Major, don’t look so startled, I’m not talking about myself. Young Ripon would have to get up early in the morning before he caught me believing one of his yarns. So now you know why Ripon has to be nice to me (though I’m sure he says spiteful things behind my back). I know everything. Are you going to be nice to me, Ripon?”

“Yes, yes,” mumbled Ripon, who, with his head on one side, did in fact look somewhat discomfited. “You always make such a fuss when you know very well that we all dote on you.”

“Well,” said the Major. “I know one or two things about *you*, Sarah. Your father is the manager of the only bank in Kilnalough and you give piano lessons to private pupils in your father’s home behind the bank. I hope I haven’t got you mixed up. No? You’ve had a grand piano brought down from Pigott’s in Dublin. In order to get it into the house you had to remove the legs and then replace them, I understand ...What else do I know? Let me see, your name is Devlin, isn’t it? I’m sure I know some other things but my memory is terrible these days.”

“Angela told you all that, of course. But you’ve forgotten the most important thing.”

“What’s that?”

“The fact that I’m a Catholic. Yes, I can see that she told you but that you regard it as a fact too shameful to mention. Or perhaps you regard it as good manners not to mention such an affliction.”

“What absolute nonsense!”

“Pay no attention, Sarah got out of bed the wrong side as usual.”

“Be quiet, Ripon! It’s not nonsense at all. Ripon’s father calls us ‘fish-eaters’ and ‘Holy Romans’ and so on. So does Ripon. So will you, Major, when you’re among the ‘quality.’ In fact, you’ll become a member of the ‘quality’ yourself, high and mighty, too good for the rest of us.”

“I hope not to be so bigoted,” said the Major smiling. “Surely there’s no need to abandon one’s reason simply because one is in Ireland.”

“In Ireland you must choose your tribe. Reason has nothing to do with it. But let’s talk about something else, Major. Is it true what they say (because, of course, I hear all the gossip), is it true that Angela’s Major had to stay in hos-pital so long because he wasn’t quite himself, so to speak, in the head?”

“Ah,” thought the Major, nettled, “she’s cruel...cruel... but then life in a wheelchair must be terrible.” He tried to picture himself in a wheelchair for the rest of his life and it did indeed seem terrible. All at once he felt extremely tired remembering the breathless, swaying cabin on board the mail boat, remembering also an interminable conversation he had got into with some army chap on his way to Dublin Castle, drinking brandy and soda in the bar, on the subject of cricket, and the afternoon seemed endless, endless.

“I was looking at the flowers which have run wild over by the summerhouse,” Sarah was saying, “and I heard the shots. Were you hunting that policeman? How peculiar! And then what was I doing? Yes, I was going to steal an apple and you caught me in the act.”

“Let me help you steal it,” the Major said. “I’m sure it will give you indigestion though.” He reached up to detach the apple and it fell with a flurry of leaves into Sarah’s lap.

“Thank you, thank you,” she exclaimed, sinking her pretty white teeth into the apple and making a face because it was so tart. “As a reward, Major, and you too, Ripon, I shall allow you to wheel me back to watch all those fat men playing tennis...or rather, no, the Major shall have the honour of wheeling me because I hurt his feelings just now by saying he wasn’t quite himself, and I want to make amends and, besides, he won’t think me so nasty if he wheels me.”

“Ah, she’s cruel,” thought the Major, his feelings hurt afresh. Nevertheless he took hold of the wheelchair and began to push her. And, curiously enough, he did feel a little better as he pushed her up the drive and thought that perhaps she was not quite as nasty as he had supposed.

“Actually,” Ripon said, “it was one of the appalling Shinners we were hunting, not the policeman.”

“Ah, a Shinner,” Sarah replied absently. “That’s a different matter altogether.” And she fell silent as they made their way slowly up the drive and round past the garages to where they could hear the ping of tennis rackets and the sound of voices in the still evening.

The Majestic's grounds were laid out on such an expansive scale that the Major was surprised to find that Edward's game of tennis was taking place on a rather cramped and grassless court tucked in the right angle formed by the dining-rooms and another wing of lighter and less weatherworn stone, evidently an addition to the main building to cope with the hotel's former popularity. This court had an advantage for spectators, however: outside the French windows there was a terrace with comfortable deck-chairs which the Major, who was exhausted, eyed hopefully. Sarah had changed her mind about watching the tennis and had dismissed Ripon and himself before reaching their destination. No sooner was she out of earshot when Ripon had said: "She can walk perfectly well, of course, without that wheelchair. That's just to get sympathy." Seeing the Major's disbelief, he added: "I've seen her walking perfectly well when she thought no one was looking. I know you don't believe me but you'll see, you'll see."

"What an odious young man," thought the Major. "No wonder Angela didn't mention him in her letters." But nobody else was taking an interest in his arrival at the hotel, so for the moment he was obliged to remain in Ripon's company. Besides, Ripon had at last made up his mind to head in the direction of the deck-chairs that stood invitingly unoccupied on the terrace and the Major was aching to sit down.

Before he could reach them, however, he was intercepted by a maid with the news that the ladies wanted to speak to him. Looking round, he saw that a number of elderly ladies were gathered round a table at the far end of the terrace in a corner sheltered from the breeze. They waved and beckoned eagerly as he looked in their direction; they had evidently been in considerable trepidation lest he pass by without seeing them. As he walked over to introduce himself their anticipation increased visibly.

"Yes, yes, Major," one of the ladies said with a smile. "We already know who you are, we've heard such a lot about you from dear Angela and we do hope you're better. It must have been very alarming for you."

"Much better, thank you," replied the Major and as he was introduced to Miss Johnston, Miss Bagley, Mrs Rice, Miss Porteous, Mrs Herbert, and Miss Staveley (without, however, being able to identify clearly who was who) he wondered just how Angela had described the prolonged attack of "nerves" which had accompanied his convalescence. But the ladies were becoming impatient with the long introductions and with the little speech of welcome to the Majestic which followed, delivered by the only lady whose name and face had remained firmly cemented together, Miss Johnston. "Ask him, ask him!" they murmured, clutching their shawls and stoles around their shoulders, for by now the westering sun had all but left the terrace, blotted out by the great mass of the Majestic, and presently they would have to go indoors.

"We should like to know," began Miss Johnston impressively, "whether you had tea this afternoon in the Palm Court."

"Tea? Why, yes, thank you, I did," replied the Major, staring at them in surprise. The ladies were exchanging significant glances.

"Thank you, Major. That was all we wanted to know," Miss Johnston said in clipped tones and the Major felt himself to be dismissed.

In the meantime, to the Major's relief, Ripon had sloped off somewhere and there was a prospect of being able to relax undisturbed in one of the deck-chairs by the tennis court. Hardly had he sat down, however, when Ripon reappeared with a glass of beer in his hand and sat down beside him. Without offering the Major a drink he began to make comments in a confidential tone about anyone who happened to stray within his field of vision. The old ladies? Permanent residents "battening on the poor old Majestic like leeches, impossible to get rid of, most of them won't even pay their wretched bills unless one gets a bit sticky with them..." That poor old blighter sitting by himself near the summerhouse, the chap with the drop on the end of his nose? "Used to be a friend of Parnell and a man of great influence with the Parliamentary Party. These days no one speaks to him, he's a dreadful old bore..." That young fellow with the pale face lurking on the steps down to the next terrace? "The twins' tutor...but since they don't need a tutor (or refuse to have one, it comes to the same thing) the chap never does a stroke, always lurking around and toadying to Father. I can hardly bear to look at his neck, his collar always looks like a dirty, bloodstained bandage. Frightful fellow. Another thing, I have it on reliable authority that he has a cloven hoof; he has been observed bathing."

Ripon fell silent. Sarah was approaching with Angela, who wanted to know if the Major had met her "best friend in the world" ...the person without whom she didn't know what she would do in Kilnalough, where life was so dull and the people, although kindness itself, so uncultured that one hardly knew what to say. Did the Major know that, apart from the one in the vestry at St Michael's and perhaps one at the chapel (she didn't know about that) and two or three broken-down old things here at the Majestic, Sarah was the only person in Kilnalough who owned a piano and that this piano had been brought down from Pigotts of Dublin? The Major, as he listened and nodded politely, began to wonder, not for the first time, whether Angela was conscious of having written him so many letters. Could it be, he wondered as Angela explained how the beast's legs had been sawn off and reattached, that this was a case of automatic writing, that one night in every week she would throw back the bedclothes and with staring eyes and arms outstretched, clad only in a shimmering nightdress, walk mechanically to her writing-desk and set to work?

Sarah said: "Angela, how are you these days? I see so little of you."

"Much the same," Angela murmured. "Much the same." And there was silence for a moment except for the sound of scuffling feet and hard breathing from the near-by tennis court. Brightening, however, she added: "But how are *you,* Sarah? Life must be such a trial for you—yes, I know it must be—the things all the rest of

us take for granted and yet you're like a perfect angel, never a word of complaint!"

"Oh no, that's not true at all. I'm evil and bad-tempered and always complaining but you're so good yourself that you don't even notice it."

"Well," said Angela, "I'm sure that's not true but, anyway, it's so nice to be having a conversation that's not about Home Rule and Nationalism and so forth, which is all we ever seem to talk about these days. I'm sure London's not what it used to be before the war (everyone says it's not) but at least there's still conversation. Brendan, you must tell us all about it, we're becoming hopelessly provincial although even in Kilnalough we hear the most tantalizing rumours."

But the Major was at a loss to find anything to tell them. The few chats he had had with his aunt, pleasant though they had been, would certainly not qualify as conversation in Angela's eyes. And as to what the tantalizing rumours might refer to he had no idea. In any case before he had time to reveal his ignorance Edward Spencer called up from the tennis court: "See that the Major gets himself a room, Ripon, will you? Show him the ropes and..." He was interrupted by a flurry of agile volleying at the net... "and all that sort of thing," he added lamely, picking up the ball, which had ended in the net at his feet. And then Angela had wandered away absently and was helping a very old lady, whom the Major provisionally identified as Miss Bagley, to wind her wool.

"If I were you, Major," Ripon said gesturing up to the left, "I should aim for a room up there somewhere around the third floor...that part of the place is in reasonable condition by the look of it." He must have noticed the Major's look of astonishment because he added: "A lot depends on how the roof is. We're not as watertight as we might be...though the weather does seem fairly settled at the moment."

Could it be that Ripon was actually suggesting that he should go and forage for a room by himself while he remained slumped in a deck-chair? A moment later and there was no doubt of it. Ripon said: "In my experience it's usually best to have a look before the sun goes down because sometimes, you know, one finds that not all the lights are working."

"How incredibly...well, *Irish*!" thought the Major bitterly. The fellow might at least have collared a servant and told him to show him up to a room. And was one expected to draw one's own bath? However, he would no doubt have accustomed himself to the idea since the quickest way to find a bed and a bath was plainly by not depending on the Spencers, had not the wretched, cruel (though crippled) girl Sarah not immediately divined his suffering and said: "Ripon, you can't possibly let the Major who looks so pink and exhausted and offended wander all over the hotel by himself trying to find a pillow on which to lay his head. Major, you mustn't let the thoughtless and inconsiderate Ripon treat you this way." A surge of anger took hold of the Major. He would gladly have strangled her. As he stood up Ripon said: "Oh, the Major doesn't mind fending for himself, do you?" Then, possibly concluding that the Major did, after all, mind, he added: "I'm going upstairs anyway so I may as well give you a hand."

Ripon got to his feet and led the way out, but not before Sarah had caught the Major's sleeve and said: "I'm sorry... I'm always saying stupid things that come into my head."

She must have known, of course, that that would only make things worse—but no, perhaps she really wanted, in spite of everything, to be forgiven.

The room he found, though dusty, was a pleasant one on the third floor facing the sea. He had chosen it after looking at only three or four others. Ripon had disappeared immediately, but arrangements, he hoped, had been made for someone to clean it and make up the bed later on. In the meantime he had unpacked his suitcase and was glad to find that his bottles of cologne and macassar were unbroken after all; for some time he had been intending to achieve a smarter appearance, hoping that this might dissipate the notion that he was unstable and suffered from "nerves." Having arranged the bottles on the dressing-table beside his silver hairbrushes he investigated the adjoining bathroom. A great gush of rust-coloured water came out of the taps at first, but then gradually it cleared to a pale amber and though it never became quite warm enough for comfort he endured it and felt better afterwards.

It was true that there was a curious smell in the room, a sweetish and disturbing smell which lingered even when he opened wide the French window on to the balcony. But he decided to forget about it and enjoy the splendid view over the series of terraces descending to the sea, until at last he heard the distant boom of the gong and made his way downstairs in search of the dining-room.

He found the Spencers waiting for him around a dimly lit table above which a faint aura of exasperation seemed to hang. He assumed that they were displeased at being made to wait for him. As soon as he made his appearance Edward picked up a heavy hand-bell and rang it vigorously. This done, he went to a small concealed door in the oak panelling (which the Major took to be a broom cupboard) and whisked it open. An elderly lady stepped out. She was dressed entirely in black except for a white lace cap pinned haphazardly to her faded bundle of grey hair. She was evidently blind, for Edward led her to the table and sat her down before instructing her in deafening tones that Brendan, that was to say the Major, Angela's Major, had come home, home from the war...

"Angela's Major," she murmured. "Where is he?"

And the Major was apologized to and led forward to kneel beside the chair while the old lady ran a

withered hand over his features. Suddenly she cried petulantly: “That’s not him! That’s someone else!” and there was confusion for a moment while old Mrs Rappaport (for the Major had identified her as Angela’s widowed grandmother) was shifted into a position suitable for addressing the steaming plate of brown soup in front of her. A silver spoon was put in her hand, a napkin was tied round her neck and, still protesting feebly, she began to siphon up her soup with great rapidity.

Thereafter the meal became lugubrious and interminable, even to the Major who thought that in hospital he had explored the very depths of boredom. Edward and Ripon were annoyed with each other for some reason and disinclined for conversation. The tutor apparently did not eat with the family; at any rate he was nowhere to be seen. The food was entirely tasteless except for a dish of very salty steamed bacon and cabbage that gave off a vague, wispy odour of humanity. But the Major did not really mind. He was hungry once more and chewed away with a weary ferocity. Indeed, he was light-headed with fatigue and as he chewed his thoughts kept wandering to the bed that awaited him, as a bridegroom throughout a long wedding-feast might contemplate his bride.

In the farthest shadowy reaches of the dining-room a handful of guests dotted here and there at small tables occasionally revealed their presence by a cleared throat or a rattle of silver. But silence collected between the tables in layers like drifts of snow. Once in the course of the meal a brief, querulous argument broke out at the other end of the room; someone complained that his private jar of pickles had been used without his consent (it seemed to be the old man Ripon had described as a “friend of Parnell” but the Major could not be sure); but then silence returned, and once again the clinking of cutlery. Why are we all sitting here in shadowy silence clinking our chains like souls in perdition? Even in Kilnalough, he felt sure, in the wretched whitewashed cottages he had seen or in the parlours behind the straggling shop-fronts there would be identical shadowy figures clinking in silence as they ate their meals around a hearth. And it was too much for him, tired as he was, to endure. For this was the Major’s first night in Ireland and, like a man struggling to retain his consciousness as he inhales the first fumes of chloroform, he had not yet allowed himself to surrender to the country’s vast and narcotic inertia. He would leave the Majestic tomorrow, he told himself, or the day after, at latest. He would settle his business with Angela and go. After all, he had never really believed that they would get married. At most it had never been more than a remote possibility.

The meal progressed to some form of apple pudding which the Major, gorged on bacon and cabbage, declined politely. Edward and Ripon maintained their sullen feud. (What the devil was it all about?) Old Mrs Rappaport ate noisily and voraciously. As for Angela, his erstwhile “fiancée,” she seemed to have exhausted herself completely with her afternoon’s evocation of the splendours of her youth. Pale and listless, oblivious of her Major’s return from the war or of her ritual “every day I miss you more and more,” she toyed with her napkin ring and kept her eyes, unfocused and unseeing, on the sparkling silver crown of the cut-glass salt-cellar in front of her.

When at last it was over (no question of the women retiring while the men drank port; at the Majestic everyone retired together, “like a platoon under fire,” thought the Major sourly), and in the pitch-black corridor of the third floor he felt his hand close over the handle of the door to his room the Major was assailed by an immense sensation of relief and surrender. With a sigh he opened the door.

Inside, however, he received a truly terrible shock. Either he was in the wrong room or his bed had not been made up! But he *was* in the right room: his suitcase was there, his bottles of cologne and macassar were standing on the dressing-table.

He had no sheets to sleep in.

Now this was really too much! He picked up a china pitcher and dashed it savagely against the wall. It made a terrible crash as it splintered. But then silence descended, the all-absorbing silence of the mild Irish night. A squadron of fat brown moths zoomed clumsily in through the open window, attracted by the light. He closed it and sat disconsolately on the bed. The house was dark and silent now. He could hardly rouse the Spencers and demand sheets. He would simply have to sleep here as best he could, wrapped in dusty blankets. (It was true, of course, that he had slept in worse circumstances, but all the same...!)

Then he noticed again, more strongly than before, the sweetish, nauseating odour he had decided to forget about earlier. It was an awful smell. He could not stand it. But the thought of opening the window to more moths made his skin crawl. He took a slipper from his suitcase and stalked the fluttering moths. But after he had splattered one or two against the wall he stopped, his nerves jangled by remorse, and wished he had left them alive. So while the others continued to whiz and circle around the electric light he started to search for the source of the smell, looking in cupboards, sniffing the washbasin, peering under the bed (none of these things, as it happened, smelled very savoury).

A small cupboard stood beside the bed. He wrenched open the door. On the top shelf there was nothing. On the bottom shelf was a chamber-pot and in the chamber-pot was a decaying object crawling with white maggots. From the middle of this object a large eye, bluish and corrupt, gazed up at the Major, who scarcely had time to reach the bathroom before he began to vomit brown soup and steamed bacon and cabbage. Little by little the smell of the object stole into the bathroom and enveloped him.

“Let us pray. Let us thank the Lord for all His mercies, let us thank Him for His Justice enshrined in the peace

treaty signed in Versailles last week in which the Prussian tyranny is accorded punishment...For the righteous shall triumph, saith the Lord; and in this world we are all subject, great and small, to God's Justice and to His Order. For there *is* an order in the universe...there *is* an order. Everything is ordained for a purpose in this life, from the lowest to the highest, for God's universe is like a pyramid reaching from the most lowly amongst us up to Heaven. Without this purpose our life here below would be nothing more than a random collection of desperate acts...I repeat, a random collection of desperate acts. Ripon, would you have the common decency to put that cigarette out and wait until I've finished?"

"What?" said Ripon, looking surprised. "Oh, sorry."

Edward waited impressively while his son dropped his cigarette into the murky water of a vase containing a few pale-yellow roses.

"Now," Edward went on with a frown, his concentration disturbed, "let us...let us never forget our position, the part each one of us must play in the Divine Purpose. We must not shirk. For there *is* an order. Without it our lives would be meaningless. So let us thank Him for the duties that accompany our privileges and pray that we may always discharge them as His faithful servants...Now let us thank the Lord for all His other mercies to us, for the reunion of families, for the produce of the land which comes to our table..."

Edward, inspiration gone, eye flitting round the room in search of reasons for giving thanks, was obliged to pause every now and then to collect and review fresh evidence of the divine magnanimity. In this way, among the more commonly acknowledged gifts of heaven he came to give thanks for some curious things: "the chairs on which we rest our tired bodies," for example, "the faithful dogs" of Kilnalough, or, most curious of all, "the splendid century made by Hobbs against Lancashire yesterday." It seemed to the Major that there might possibly be no end to this list: after all, if one was going to give thanks for chairs, dogs, and cricketers, why should one ever stop?

As it happened, however, Edward did stop, after a particularly long and distressing pause, by giving thanks for all those present who had come safely through "the dark watches of the night." "Amen to that, anyway," thought the Major peevishly.

But Edward had not quite finished. He still had to commemorate the Fallen. The Major, who was hungry again (either because the country air was giving him an appetite or because he had vomited up the only solid meal he had consumed in the last twenty-four hours) and who had been entertaining disabused thoughts about Edward's prayers, now felt displeased with himself. With his eye distractedly on a giant silver dish bearing a domed lid surmounted by an ornamental spike (strangely reminiscent of a Boche helmet) beneath which he believed eggs, bacon and kidneys to be cooling, he did his best to reverse his thoughts into a more pious direction.

The breakfast room, though small by comparison with the dining-room, was spacious, airy, and on sunny days presumably sunny since it faced south and was lit by immense windows, the upper part of which (beyond where a man with his feet planted on the low sill might be able to reach) was opaque with grime. The Spencer family and a number of the hotel guests were grouped round the largest table, hands on the backs of chairs and chins on chests (with the exception of Ripon who with his head on one side was staring up at a generous cobweb billowing near the ceiling). Behind them, grouped at random in an attitude of devotion or subjection (rather as if they had been left chairless in a frantic game of Musical Chairs) stood Murphy, three or four maids in uniform, a hugely fat lady in an apron and Evans, the tutor, his face pitted and pale as death. The servants, the Major assumed, were not taking part in this alien act of worship but merely waiting for it to be over so that they could serve breakfast. But Edward was still going through his ritual.

To the wall behind the table was attached a carved wooden memorial in the shape of a gigantic book with open pages; from behind them rose the head of a unicorn. Book and unicorn together made up the Spencer family crest; all Angela's letters had been embossed with it. In this case the varnished, elaborately curling pages had recently had two long lists of names chiselled into them, startling in their newness, the white wood beneath the varnish exposed like wounds.

Who were these poor chaps? the Major wondered distantly, without pity. On what basis had selection been made? Young men from Kilnalough? But recruiting had been poor in Ireland. Connolly, the Sinn Feiners, Nationalists of every hue had declared that Irishmen should not fight in the British Army. But if not from Kilnalough from Trinity, perhaps, or from some heroic cricket club or old school. There were so many ways in which the vast army of the dead could be drilled, classified, inspected, and made to present their ghostly arms. No end to the institutions, civilian and military, busy drawing up their sombre balance-sheet and recording it in wood, stone or metal. But if there was no end to the institutions there was no end to the dead men either. In truth, there were more than enough to go round several times over. "Greater love hath no man than this," the Major thought mechanically. Bacon and eggs...the saliva rinsed shamefully around his teeth.

Long ranks of tiny eyes were now staring at the Major as if accusing him of being both alive and about to eat breakfast. With a dignified gesture Edward had grasped each page of the book and folded it outward and back on concealed hinges, revealing row after row of photographs of young men, most of them in uniform. The photographs were not very good, some of them. Fuzzy or beginning to fade, ill-assorted; one or two of the young men were laughing unsuitably or, dazzled by the sun, looked to be already in agony. For the most part, though, they were meticulously uniformed and the Major could imagine them sitting there, grim and composed, as if for a portrait in oils. As often as not this long exposure to the unblinking eye had so

completely steamed the life out of them that now one was difficult to tell from another.

Edward said in somewhat sepulchral tones: “They gave their lives for their King, their country and for us. Let us remain silent for a moment in their name.” Silence descended. The only sounds to be heard were Murphy’s regular, whistling breath and a faint gurgle of gastric juices.

Meanwhile the Major was trying once again to delve into the past with the paralysed fingers of his memory, hoping to grasp some warmth or emotion, the name perhaps of a dead friend that might mean the beginning of grief, the beginning of an end to grief. But now, as he stood at the breakfast table, even the dead faces that nightly appeared in his dreams remained absent. There was only the cold and constant surprise that would come, say, from dreaming of home and waking among strangers. He ground his teeth at the accusing, many-eyed memorial and thought: “Hypocrisy.”

As Edward said grace his eye met the Major’s for an instant and perhaps he noticed the Major’s bitterness, for a shadow of concern crossed his face. Turning, he closed the memorial and took his seat.

Now that the domed lid was being lifted from the silver dish the Major’s spirits improved and he thought that today, after breakfast, he must have a talk with Angela and clear up her misconceptions. Then he would leave. After all, if he did not leave promptly his presence might well foster more misconceptions. If she could nominate herself his “fiancée” on the strength of a few meetings in Brighton she might well be capable of arranging the wedding without consulting him. All the same, it was difficult to bring the matter up while Angela continued to treat him as a casual acquaintance. It seemed indelicate to recall that time they had kissed with the cactus in Brighton.

“Did you sleep well, Brendan?” Angela wanted to know... and looking at her pale and frigid face he wondered whether the kiss might have taken place only in his imagination.

“Yes,” the Major replied curtly, hoping to indicate the contrary.

“That’s good,” Edward said with satisfaction, spearing the fat rump of a kidney and a few leaves of bacon (all stone-cold by now and remarkably greasy). “Don’t pay any heed to what those bally guide-books say. It may not be quite what it was in the old days but it’s still a comfortable old place. Anyway, they’re all written by Liberals and Socialists and so forth... They envy us, if you want my opinion, it’s as simple as that.”

This was too much for the Major. “There was a sheep’s head in the cupboard by my bed.”

“Good heavens,” exclaimed Angela, though without surprise.

“That’s what we give the dogs. Boil ’em down. Very nourishing and they cost nothing at all. The butcher would probably throw them away if it wasn’t for us, though I’ve heard the country people sometimes eat them too. You should see the healthy coats they have on them. Come along with me afterwards and see for yourself.”

The Major, who hoped never in his life to see another sheep’s head, could only nod mutely and trust to luck that Edward would forget.

He didn’t, however. Just as the Major was preparing to slope off after breakfast (and perhaps corner Angela to drop a few hints about not wanting to marry her) Edward abruptly materialized at his elbow and steered him firmly down unfamiliar corridors, through a yard festooned with damp sheets bulging in the wind and into a smaller yard walled by outhouses. Here a dozen or so dogs of varying ages, shapes and sizes (whose names the Major already knew by heart) were dozing on piles of straw or empty sacks.

“My dogs,” Edward said with simplicity. “Aren’t they beauties? Mind where you walk.”

“They certainly are,” the Major replied insincerely.

The dogs brightened up at the sight of Edward and crowded round him excitedly, snapping at his fingers and trying to land their paws on his chest, barging, quarrelling and getting in the way to such an extent that the two men had trouble wading through them to reach a gate on the far side. This led into yet another yard, empty this time except for a three-sided fireplace sprouting black smoke and orange flames. Over the fire hung the round black belly of an iron cauldron, steaming and bubbling. The dogs sprang towards it in a frenzy of excitement.

Evans, the tutor, was standing beside the cauldron stirring it, his pale, unhealthy face completely expressionless. “What a strange fellow!” thought the Major. Stirring the cauldron with the flames leaping about his ears made him look positively sinister.

“Thank you, Tutor. A good brew today, is it?” Edward turned to the Major. “Evans does the cooking, I do the feeding. Dogs know who feeds them, believe you me. It’s not the same thing if you tell your servants to do it...they don’t know who’s master (I mean, the *dogs* don’t). Now take a look at that. Rich and juicy!”

The Major peered with distaste at the simmering liquid. Fortunately the surface was covered with an oily grey froth which masked the pot’s macabre contents.

“Very nourishing, I shouldn’t be surprised,” observed the Major drily. But Edward was not yet satisfied. Picking up a couple of charred sticks, he fished with them until he had located something beneath the surface. A moment later the Major was face to face with a long, narrow skull, eyeless and tipped with grinning teeth.

“Well, thanks a lot for showing me. I think I’ll take a stroll round while the weather holds.” The Major stared up at the overcast sky and then, backing away a couple of paces, almost fell over a massive sheepdog that had moved up behind him. Edward grasped him firmly by the upper arm—whether to help him keep his balance or to prevent him from leaving was not immediately clear.

“Look here, Major,” he said in a conciliatory tone. “We don’t want to be too hard on the boy, do we?”

The Major stared at him and Edward, taking his silence for disagreement, continued: “A lot of it’s my own fault, I realize that. He was sacked from school, d’you see, and I had him sent to a crammer. Shouldn’t have done that...turned him agin the government. I was angry, you know, and thought I wouldn’t let him get away with it...not scot free, anyway.”

“You mean Ripon?”

“Yes, yes, Ripon. I know you’ve been wondering why he didn’t volunteer and so forth. It’s only natural after what you’ve been through.”

“Really, Mr Spencer, I can assure you...” But Edward was patting his arm soothingly and saying: “Only natural. Anyone would feel the same in your position. Those who go and those who stay at home...white feathers and all that rot. He’s not a coward, though, and neither am I. Take a look at this!” Dropping the charred sticks, he unbuttoned his waistcoat and began pulling his shirt out until he had uncovered a patch of pale skin at his waist. In the middle of the patch was a round white scar as big as a halfpenny.

“In the service of the King-Emperor. Didn’t think I’d get back from that little affair. Somehow or other it missed the intestines or I wouldn’t be here to tell the tale. Get down, sir!” A spaniel was attempting to lick the exposed patch of skin.

While Edward adjusted his clothing the Major repeated his innocence of any critical thoughts about Ripon. “Lot of fuss about nothing, was it?” Edward hastened to agree. “Well, that’s all right then. Still, I wouldn’t have wanted you to think we were a family of milksops. Ripon told Angela that the first thing you asked him was whether he’d been abroad. He was angry with Angela, d’you see, because he thought she’d been telling tales.”

There was silence for a moment. Edward had retrieved one of the sticks and was stirring the pot, with the dogs milling and woofing round him. His rugged face with its clipped moustache and flattened ears was still scowling with anxiety in spite of the Major’s reassurance.

“He’s not a bad boy at heart, you know. It’s true he was sacked from school (though not for anything unhealthy, mind)...and I suppose that rather set him agin the government. I lose my temper with him at times and that doesn’t help...Get down! I’ll tell you when it’s ready,” he added to a large Alsatian puppy that from behind had forced its head under his arm. “All the same, he should have volunteered when he was needed, coward or no coward. He may never have another chance as good as the one he missed.”

A chance to do what? wondered the Major. To have his name carved into the dark wood of Edward’s war memorial, a dead servant of His Majesty? But a nation must require all its people to participate. A just cause must be defended by everyone. There’s no room for young men who are “agin the government.” Believing, as the Major did, that the cause *had* been a just one and that throughout the world the great civilizing power of the British Empire had been at stake, it was right that Ripon should be held in contempt. Besides, Ripon was perhaps alive in the place of one of those destroyed men who came at night to plead with him in the agony of his dreams.

The Major glanced at Edward. What a man to have such a son! How stiff and military he looked! When he moved, one half expected to hear the clinking of medals. The sort of man who in peacetime looks rather out of place, like a heavy fur coat on a hot summer’s day. But again he noticed that mild and disabused expression of the eyes which contrasted so strongly with Edward’s military appearance, that trace of self-mockery so firmly restrained that perhaps even Edward himself refused to acknowledge it except in his most private thoughts.

“No you don’t,” Edward said, aiming a kick at a tall and rickety Afghan hound that was poking its long nose into one of the Major’s trouser pockets. “Come on then,” he added, addressing the multitude of dogs. He unhooked the cauldron and at the centre of a whirlpool of barking, yelping animals dragged it over to a shallow trough, saying over his shoulder to the Major: “You know, it smells so good I shouldn’t mind eating it myself.”

The Major spent the rest of the morning trying to corner Angela. For a while he wandered the hotel aimlessly, meeting no one at all. He walked down corridors, through deserted rooms in twilight, often as not curtains still drawn from the evening before (perhaps even from many, many evenings before), up a staircase here, down a staircase there. Shortly before eleven o’clock, attracted by a smell of coffee, he found his way to the kitchens, which were chilly and cavernous, the whitewashed walls hung with an armoury of giant pots and pans (some of them big enough to braise an entire sheep, legs and all) which for the most part were rusted beyond recognition, so that they looked more like huge reddish-brown growths sprouting from the walls. In the middle of the table a tortoiseshell cat lay in a veined meat-dish, dozing.

Here in the kitchens the Major was given a cup of tea (the coffee had been an olfactory illusion) stewed black and bitter by numerous reheatings, served to him by the extremely fat lady he had noticed at breakfast. She was the cook, he gathered, but though she appeared garrulous her accent was such that he could understand little of what she said. He did believe her to say, however, that “the mistress” might be found arranging flowers in the dining-room above.

“The mistress?” he repeated, wanting to make sure (he had been trailing long enough through empty rooms). He pointed up at the ceiling. The cook nodded vigorously and began to speak again, rapidly and with considerable urgency. Evidently what she was saying was important. Her face was working with emotion;

between volleys of words there were shuddering intakes of breath; her shoulders shook, causing the gelatinous layers of flesh on her arms to shiver. “Good heavens!” thought the Major with concern. “What can it all be about?” Here and there he recognized a word: “heaven”... and “poor creature”...and “gone to the angels”; but to capture the sense of what she was saying was impossible. Presumably the good lady was referring to Angela’s mother who also, come to that, might be described as “the mistress”—dead of an embolism, he remembered, on St Swithin’s Day, 1910. But the cook obviously thought that he had understood her tirade, so to show sympathy he nodded glumly as she stopped speaking and began to chop away with extraordinary speed and ferocity, using a kitchen knife as big as a bayonet. And then, to make things worse, he noticed that her eyes were streaming with tears. She was weeping without restraint! And it was all his fault. He swallowed his tea (making a face, it was as bitter as wormwood) and stole out of the kitchen. But a little later, as he felt his way along the damp, stone corridor to the stairs, it occurred to him that the cook had been chopping onions—a fact which might have contributed to her display of emotion.

It took him a little time to find the right stairway to make the ascent to the dining-room. This was because he did not fathom immediately that it was necessary to go on down a few steps before joining the main staircase, from where one could go on up or down as the case might be (though God only knew where “down” might lead to). In other words, the kitchens were situated, for a reason that the architect alone could have explained, on a tributary staircase. Other similar staircases branched off here and there, but though he was curious to see where they led the Major was now hastening upwards to find Angela.

He was not surprised, however, to find that there was no sign of Angela in the dining-room. He stood there for a moment looking round. It was very silent. Some of the tables, it was true, were decorated with fresh flowers. On one of the tables a bunch of carnations and feathery green leaves lay on a newspaper waiting to be arranged in vases. A pair of scissors lay beside them, giving the impression that they had perhaps been abandoned a moment before he had stepped into the room. It was, he presumed, out of the question that Angela was deliberately avoiding him, so, in theory at least, all he had to do was to station himself beside these cut flowers which she certainly would not leave for long before putting into water.

A ponderous creaking began on the far side of the room. Ah, it was the dumb-waiter rising from the kitchen, he could see the ropes shivering as it rose. He walked over to have a look at it. Abruptly he had an intuition that there was something strange or terrifying on it: a decaying sheep’s head, for example, or something even stranger, perhaps the cook’s weeping head on a platter surrounded by chopped onions. The dumb-waiter stopped for a moment and then started again. When it reached the top he smiled at what it contained. It was the tortoiseshell cat he had seen in the kitchen, still sitting on the meat-dish. When the conveyance had come to a halt it jumped off and wound through his legs. The dumb-waiter started down again empty.

A few moments later, with the cat cradled in his arms, he spotted Angela. She was on the next terrace below the tennis court carrying a spray of beech leaves and walking swiftly towards a flight of steps some distance away. Thinking that if he could find the entrance she was making for he might be able to intercept her, he set off rapidly, taking the cat with him for company. The cat did not like the idea, however, leapt out of his arms and vanished back the way they had come. The Major pressed on down the corridor he was following, relatively certain this time that he was going in the right direction. On his way he passed one of the old ladies he had been introduced to the evening before. She was leaning on a stick, arrested half-way between two sharp bends in a long section of the corridor without doors or windows. As he passed she murmured something indignantly but he merely nodded cheerfully, pretending not to hear. He was in a hurry. Excited, he turned another corner at the end of which, by his calculations of the exterior of the building and the distance he had walked, there should be a glass door through which Angela would enter at any moment. But there wasn’t. At the end of the corridor there was merely a blank wall and a musty, dilapidated sitting-room. “This is absurd,” he thought, half irritated and half amused. “To hell with her. I’ll see her at lunch.”

But Angela failed to appear at lunch. The Major sat beside Edward, who was by turns morose and indignant about the state of the country. Another R.I.C. barracks had been attacked and stripped of arms; the young hooligans had nothing better to do these days, it seemed. They preferred shooting people in the back to doing an honest day’s work. But for all that, he hadn’t noticed many of them coming forward when Sir Henry Wilson had called for volunteers to join in a fair fight. At this the “friend of Parnell,” who was sitting at the next table, stirred uncomfortably and muttered something.

“What’s that you say?” demanded Edward.

“Thousands of Nationalists fought against Germany,” the old man murmured, his voice still scarcely above a whisper. “Constitutional Nationalists who fought not only for France’s and Belgium’s freedom but for Ireland’s too. Not all Nationalists belong to Sinn Fein, you know...”

“But they’re all tarred with the same brush. Sinn Fein demands a republic. Why? Because they hate England and sided with Germany during the war. Would they change their tune if Ireland was given Dominion Home Rule? Of course they wouldn’t! It would merely whet their appetites for more. There’s no middle of the road in Ireland, for the simple reason that the Home Rulers are playing right into the hands of Sinn Fein. Perhaps they mean well. Maybe they’re just fools. But the result is the same.”

"They're *not* fools!" cried the old man, raising his voice. A faint flush had crept over his gaunt cheeks and water slopped on to the table-cloth from the trembling glass he had been in the process of lifting to his lips. "Irishmen fought in the British Army in defence of the Empire. Those men have a right to a voice in the settlement of their country's future."

"Exactly so," agreed Edward with a contemptuous smile. "And you know as well as I do that the bulk of those who served and died came from the Unionist families of the south and west. Who have a better right to a voice than the survivors of the men who fought at Thiepval, their fathers, sons and brothers? And yet everyone seems to take it for granted that they can be suppressed or coerced just for the sake of a temporary peace or because a rabble of Irish immigrants in America have been kicking up a fuss. My dear fellow, it simply won't wash. No British Government, not even one with a tremendous victory under its belt, could get away with being so rash and unjust. If you simple-minded Dominion-Home-Rulers got your way and tried to coerce Ulster we'd end up with a bloodbath and the Empire in ruins. I repeat, there are only two sides in Ireland. Either you are a Unionist or you support Sinn Fein, which means endorsing their mad and criminal rebellion in 1916, not to mention their friend the Kaiser..."

"Who will shortly be tried and hanged in London," spoke up a gentleman in heavy tweeds. "Lloyd George said so in the House yesterday." There was a moment of approving silence and then the gentleman in tweeds went on to say that he'd met a man who knew personally one of the constables killed at Soloheadbeg quarry, a fine young man, "as straight as the day," who had only been doing his job. If that wasn't murder what was?

The Major had listened to all this with detachment. After all, it was hardly any of his business (and would be even less of his business once he had managed to have a talk with Angela). Although he felt sorry for the "friend of Parnell" who, whitefaced and evidently upset, had pushed his plate aside, unable to swallow another mouthful, it seemed to him that Edward was undoubtedly right. The Irish, as far as he knew, had always had a habit of making trouble. That was in the nature of things. As for the aim of their unruly behaviour, self-government for Ireland, that seemed quite absurd. What would be the advantage to the Irish themselves? They were so ill-educated that they could not possibly hope to gain anything from it. The English undoubtedly knew more about running the country. The priests would presumably take over if the English were not there to see fair play. He was inclined to agree with Edward that the Republican movement was merely an excuse for trouble-makers moved more by self-interest than by patriotism. For the important fact was this: the presence of the British signified a *moral* authority, not just an administrative one, here in Ireland as in India, Africa and elsewhere. It would have to be matched by the natives themselves before self-government became an acceptable proposition. So thought the Major, anyway.

But by now he had had more than enough of politics, so he decided against joining Edward and the others for coffee. Other considerations apart, the coffee at the Majestic was execrable, brewed as it was by the manservant Murphy according to some recipe of his own. Instead, he went to his room for some tobacco, passing on his way the fat cook he had reduced to tears earlier in the day. She was coming heavily down the stairs, panting slightly with the effort of negotiating the dangerously bulging carpet with a tray held in front of her. The Major peered at this tray: on it there was an entire lunch (cottage pie and stewed apple), hardly touched, pushed aside, one might suppose, by a person without appetite. The thought occurred to him that perhaps Angela was ill and this was her lunch. However, since she had been up and about during the morning it could hardly be anything serious. The cook nodded to him somewhat nervously and then stumbled on a loose stair-rod. For an instant it seemed that she must plunge headlong to the foot of the stairs. But she righted herself somehow with a rattle of plates and a slopping of water and continued on her way, leaving the Major to wonder in which room lay his pallid "fiancée."

Later in the afternoon, restless but with nothing to do, he walked into Kilnalough with the intention of finding out at the railway station at what time the trains left for Kingstown and Dublin. On his way there, however, he encountered Sarah, who was being wheeled by a very plump, voluptuous girl with dark hair and rosy cheeks ("All Irish girls are as fat as butter," thought the Major). Hardly had this person been introduced (as "Máire") when she whispered something urgently into Sarah's ear and hurried away, leaving Sarah to wheel herself.

"Well, am I as terrifying as all that?"

"She's shy. Also I expect she had some idea that I might... well, never mind. Shall I tell you who she is? After all, the sooner I tell you all the gossip the sooner you'll find Kilnalough as dull as the rest of us."

"By all means."

"She's the daughter of the wealthiest man in Kilnalough—yes, even wealthier than your friend Mr Spencer (not that I should think *he's* all that wealthy, mind you, by the look of the Majestic)—the owner of the flour mill to be precise. You didn't know that we had a flour mill here? How ignorant you are! On every single bag of Noonan's flour sold in Ireland you'll find a picture of Máire dressed up as Little Red Riding Hood carrying a basket. Isn't that charming?"

"I was hoping to hear something more scandalous."

"Very well then. Can I rely on you to be discreet?"

"Of course."

"She and your friend Ripon have an understanding."

"An understanding? You mean a...sentimental understanding?"

"On her part it's sentimental. On Ripon's I have the feeling it's more commercial than sentimental, but as you know I have a habit of thinking the worst of people. In any case, there's little chance of it coming to anything since their respective families can't abide each other."

"Romeo and Juliet."

"It would be more true to say, let me see...Iago and Juliet. What's more, Juliet is a snob." The Major laughed and Sarah turned to him with a sweet smile. Her malice amused him and, really, it was quite harmless, intended to entertain rather than hurt.

Sarah had declared her intention of buying some material at Finnegan's and they were progressing slowly up the main street in that direction, the Major pushing and Sarah chattering, teasing him by turns about his "Englishness," his "respectability," his "ramrod posture" and anything else that came into her head. The Major was only half listening, absorbed in looking round at the men in cloth caps idling on doorsteps (so few of them appeared to have any work to do), at the women in black shawls with shopping baskets, at the barefoot children playing in the gutter. How very foreign, after all, Ireland was!

Their progress up the street was now considerably impeded by a herd of cows ("How delightful, how typical!" thought the Major) which strayed not only over the road but on to the rudimentary pavement as well. Presently a motor car came up behind them with the driver sounding his horn, which did very little good since cows are inclined to panic; one of them almost charged straight back into the motor's radiator but was diverted at the last moment by a lad in a ragged overcoat who was herding the animals with a stick. Sitting beside the driver the Major recognized the burly figure of old Dr Ryan wrapped in a trench coat and numerous mufflers though the day was mild. He saw them and waved, telling the driver to pull in to the kerb to give the cattle time to move on. When they came level with him he said sternly: "Always in that chair, Sarah. You should be walking. You never do as you're told."

"Yes, yes, I know. You're always telling me," Sarah replied petulantly and glanced helplessly at the Major.

"You know, I think you like being in that chair."

"Oh you know *every*thing, Doctor!" Sarah retorted, and for an instant the Major glimpsed a bitter, sly expression on her face.

"Don't be impertinent," Dr Ryan said sharply. "And let me see you get out of that chair and walk over to me. Take hold of your young man's arm."

Sarah made a face and for a moment remained seated.

"Come on, we can't wait all day," snapped the doctor.

Looking confused and miserable, Sarah pulled herself up and, leaning heavily on the Major's arm and one of her sticks, she began to move forward. He was immediately surprised by how well she could walk. She was unsteady, it was true, but her legs seemed firm and strong. Dr Ryan, his aged head looking small and infirm on top of his great pile of cloth-ing, watched as she reached the car and started back to her chair, her slender fingers gripping the Major's forearm with a strength which surprised him.

"If you weren't so spoiled you'd be out of that chair the whole time. You could walk perfectly well if you took the trouble. And as for you, Major, perhaps you'd be kind enough to tell Edward Spencer from me to stop aggravating his tenants or there'll be trouble." With that the doctor waved to his chauffeur to drive on.

"What a dreadful old man," the Major said. "He's as sour as vinegar."

Sarah had changed her mind and no longer wanted to go to Finnegan's Drapery. She wanted to be taken home, off this hateful street; it wasn't far, the Major needn't worry, she wouldn't detain him long even though he obviously thought her company intolerable and was dying to get away...

"But I don't think anything of the kind," protested the Major, amazed. "Wherever did you get that idea?"

Ah, it was as plain as anything from the way he kept looking round him all the time, particularly when a pretty girl (one with two sound legs) passed by, dragging her skirts so prettily through the cowpats. The Major, with his "ram-rod posture," obviously had far better things he could be doing and, besides, he must be simply dying to get back to his dear Angela by now and, in any case, he had been in a great old hurry off somewhere when they had first bumped into each other...

"That's true. I was going to make some inquiries at the railway station. I'd forgotten completely."

"What? Are you leaving Kilnalough so soon? Have you and Angela had a quarrel?"

"Not only have we not had a quarrel; we haven't even spoken to each other—at least, privately. There was never really an understanding between us, you know—at least, I don't think there was; nothing serious—except that we wrote to each other regularly, of course."

"I *didn't* know that. In fact, I thought...but never mind what I thought. Why did you come here, then?"

"Oh, to get it straightened out, I suppose. I hardly know why myself. In any case I never seem able to find Angela alone. You don't think she might be deliberately avoiding me, do you?"

But Sarah made no reply. They had now turned into a street of small but well-kept buildings of red brick, in one of which was housed the bank, behind and above which Sarah lived with her parents. Would the Major care to come in and have some tea?

They went in by a side gate and followed a path between trellises of climbing roses to where a shallow wooden ramp made for Sarah's wheelchair led up to the back door. Of course, she explained, the house was not nearly as grand as the sort of place he was no doubt used to, but it would do him no harm to be in a "miserable hovel" for a change. Indeed it would do him good. She pointed out the door of a room and said she would join him there in a minute, he was to make himself at home as best he could. The Major went into the room and sat down on a blue velvet sofa to wait. An oil-painting of a cow and some trees hung over the mantelpiece. There were a few books in the bookcase, for the most part fishing and travel reminiscences. There was the piano, too, no different from other pianos except for the iron clamps which held its broken legs together. In this neat, clean room, so utterly without character, it was only these broken legs which provided a touch of comfort.

The *Irish Times* lay neatly folded on a table. He picked it up and scanned it idly. Officers' families in abject poverty. Good luck to the R34. A new era in transatlantic travel was about to begin. The Bolshevists were advancing—British seaplanes had been in action on the Finnish border. At Wimbledon Lieutenant-Colonel A.R.F. Kingscote, M.C., R.G.A., had gratifyingly beaten a young American. Dr King's Liver Pills (Dandelion and Quinine), guaranteed without mercury. Absolutely cure the symptoms of the TORPID LIVER...combat Depressed Spirits, etc. The Major folded the paper carefully and replaced it with a sigh. He was ill at ease, wondering whether it had been disloyal of him to discuss Angela with Sarah.

"I hope you won't mention our conversation to Angela," he said when Sarah at last appeared. "As you know, I haven't yet had a chance to talk to her properly."

"Of course not," Sarah said with indifference. "It's none of my business. Besides, I never see her."

"But I thought you were great friends."

"We used to be friends, but not any longer. I'm surprised you're so unobservant. Didn't you notice how coldly they treated me at the Majestic? Edward hardly speaks to me any longer. The only reason he invites me to his absurd tennis parties is because Angela is sorry for me. Yes, that's right, sorry for me! It's as clear as day. I expect you're sorry for me too if the truth be known, but I don't care. I shouldn't go to the Majestic, it would be much better not to, but I get so bored sitting here all day like a miserable cripple..."

"But Angela was so pleased to see you; and you're so pretty and amusing. Really, I'm sure you must be imagining all this," exclaimed the Major in surprise. "What possible reason could they have for not liking you?"

"They think I've been encouraging Máire (you remember that fat, ugly girl who was pushing my chair), they think I've been helping her to 'trap' their darling Ripon. They're quite wrong, of course. The last thing I'd do for a friend of mine (and she is a friend of sorts, that part is true) is to help her to 'trap' someone as odious as Ripon."

"But what do they have against her, anyway? I mean, if she's so rich and so on. The Spencers live in that huge hotel, but they don't appear to be all that well off. Ripon could surely do a lot worse."

Sarah shook her head sadly. "I can't believe that you're such an innocent, Major. D'you really mean to tell me that you don't see why the Spencers wouldn't want Ripon married to that rich, ugly creature? Well, I shall tell you, though I refuse to believe that you don't know. The reason is that Máire is a Catholic. Now do you understand?"

But before the Major had a chance to reply there was a polite knock on the door and a small dapper man dressed in a grey flannel suit of dubious cut made his appearance. He advanced holding out his hand nervously. He was, he said, Sarah's father (Sarah made no comment but looked annoyed) and he hadn't been able to resist taking a moment off to say hello to the Major, about whom he'd already heard a great deal, both from his old friend Mr Spencer and, of course, from Sarah herself (here he smiled fondly but Sarah looked more exasperated than ever)...

"I hope what you heard was complimentary."

Oh, most complimentary, of course, and it was really very kind of the Major to wheel Sarah home...getting about was something of a difficulty for her, as he could imagine, but she did very well, all things considered, she had so many kind friends who helped to lighten her load. He hoped too that the weather would be less changeable than it had been recently, particularly while the Major was visiting, it made such a difference, especially if the Major was, as he expected, a sporting man...And this was Mrs Devlin...

A heavy-set lady had entered wheeling a tea-trolley on which (the Major noticed with relief) there were only two cups, saucers, plates and cake-knives (and a splendid-looking cherry cake). Mrs Devlin nodded at the Major without speaking, hesitated for a moment and then withdrew. Mr Devlin patted his hair which was oiled flat and neat against his skull, smiled, and said that he would have to be getting his nose back to the grindstone but that it had been a pleasure and that he hoped the Major would often come again to visit them. He backed out of the room smiling and the door closed softly.

Sarah's mood had changed. To the Major's attempts at conversation she answered only in peevish monosyllables, all the time glancing round the room as if she were seeing it for the first time. Abruptly she interrupted a laborious compliment that the Major was paying to the cherry cake and said: "What an appalling room this is. You'd think some awful English person lived here." And with that she wheeled herself quickly to the door, opened it deftly and disappeared, almost before the Major had time to realize what was happening. He sat there, a half-eaten piece of cake in his fingers, wondering what she had meant by "some awful English

person" and whether she intended to come back. Presently he heard the sound of a muffled argument from some other room, a woman's voice raised in protest. But then a door slammed and a moment later Sarah reappeared, her face so dark that the Major asked her what was the matter.

"Nothing at all."

As she wheeled her chair forward the Major saw that in her lap lay a number of religious ornaments. Two plaster saints, painted in bright colours, she arranged on the piano within a few inches of his head. A wooden crucifix was propped on the mantelpiece while a crudely coloured and alarming picture of the Sacred Heart was placed on the bookcase backed by a pile of books removed from the shelf. That left another wooden crucifix which she put on the tea-table itself. The Major watched all this in amazement but said nothing, allowing himself to be given more tea and more cherry cake (which really was delicious). He munched it cautiously under the eye of the saints.

"I lease them the land at a price that's so cheap they laugh at me behind my back. I mend their roofs for them and give them seed corn and potatoes in return for a miserable percentage of their crop. I send them the vet when their cows get sick. I help them make ends meet when they spend all their money in the pub. Am I entitled to some loyalty, Major? Answer me that."

The Major had come upon Edward with a hoe in his hand, standing motionless beside a rose-bed sunk in thought. With the hoe he was now poking at the horizon to the south where a cluster of grey farm buildings stood on a ridge in the distance. Shading his eyes against the sun which for the first time that day had just appeared from beneath smooth carpets of grey cloud, the Major agreed that someone who did such things was indubitably entitled to loyalty.

"You know what I did to 'aggravate my tenants,' as old Ryan says? I asked them to sign a piece of paper saying they were loyal not to me, mind you, not to me but to the King... and that they wouldn't get mixed up in any of these Sinn Fein goings-on. Is that so terrible? Is it aggravating them to ask them to abide by the law? Well, I'll be damned if the blighters don't refuse point-blank to sign. It's Donnelly that's put them up to it, an old fellow with no teeth...'What's the meaning of this, Donnelly?' I ask him. 'Ah sure,' says he, 'we'd be in danger.' 'In danger from who?' He can't tell me the answer to that one. 'You'd never know,' he says. 'Well, Donnelly, I can tell you,' I said to him, 'if you don't sign it quick sharp you'll be in danger from me!'" Massive and imposing, Edward punctuated his explanation with sharp jabs of the hoe.

There was silence for a moment. The Major was surprised to see that Edward, who had been scowling angrily, now had a rueful smile on his face. He threw down his hoe with a sigh and fell into step beside the Major, who had decided to take a stroll round the southern corner of the hotel. "The joke is that I don't really give a damn about all that. I only lease them the land because I have to; they'd starve if I didn't. But I have no interest in it and it only causes me endless trouble. I'm not a farmer, never have been. I'd sell them the land in a trice but they couldn't even pay me the half of what it's worth. I'm not as young as I was but I often think I'd like to do something with my life. Yes, do something completely different...go back to the university, maybe, and do some research (I still take one or two scientific journals, you know, but in Kilnalough it's impossible to keep up). Have you ever thought, Brendan, how many completely different lives there are to be lived if only one could choose? I can tell you one thing, I certainly wouldn't choose to be a landlord in Ireland. One gets no thanks for it. However, that's the job I've been called to, so I suppose I must make the best of it."

As they walked they were joined by a shabby spaniel that appeared out of a clump of rhododendrons and trotted along behind Edward.

"Does old Ryan even know his doctoring? Frankly I doubt it. He must have been in the College of Surgeons when all they knew was leeches and bloodletting. And yet he's the only doctor in Kilnalough, so everyone treats him as if he's God Almighty." Edward was scowling again. He halted suddenly at a diamond-shaped bed of lavender and his scowl faded.

"Planted by my dear wife." After a moment, as if to clear up a possible misunderstanding, he added: "Before she died."

The spaniel mutely lifted a leg against an acute angle of the diamond and they set off again. The Major looked up at the great turreted wall that hung over them. They were so close to it at this point that it was impossible to gauge its size. A few yards farther on, however, they made another turn and this allowed him to see the back of the hotel which was really, in fact, the front, since the building had been designed to relate entirely to the sea. It was into the Irish Sea (and not into Ireland) that the most magnificent flight of steps led, and they were in the middle of the crescent whose curving arms spread out to embrace the distant coast of Wales across the vast expanse of windswept water. The Major was staggered to see for the first time just what this side of the crescent looked like: the extraordinary proliferation of turrets and battlements and crenellated cat-walks that hung from the building amid rusting iron balconies and French windows with drooping shutters. In the very heart of the crescent above the staircase of white stone and running from the slate roofs on one side to the slate roofs on the other was a great construction of glass which at this moment caught a stray gleam of sunlight and flared gold for a few seconds.

This, Edward was explaining, was the ballroom the Major might already have seen from the inside, a place impossible to keep warm in winter because of its glass roof. This glass roof, he went on with his eyes on his

shoes, could be a bit of a problem in summer too. However (he brightened a little), in the old days it must have been really magnificent: the great Hunt Balls, the carnivals, the regattas (think of the lanterns glimmering on the yachts that bobbed at the landing-stage)... the dancing would go on until the rising sun dimmed the chandeliers and the waiters carried in silver trays steaming with bacon and kidneys and fried eggs gleaming in the sunlight and silver coffee-pots breathing wisps of steam like... like old men talking in winter, ah, but the marvellous part was that the whole thing would have been visible from above because of the glass roof, almost as if it were taking place in the open air...the nannies and the children crowding on to the balconies to watch and to listen to the violins until they, the children, became sleepy and even maybe fell asleep completely and were carried in and put to bed, not even waking up when the grey, exhausted but content grown-ups came in to kiss them good night in the early hours of the morning before themselves retiring to sleep till the afternoon, undisturbed except for memories of violins and glinting chandeliers and silk dresses and an occasional cry of a peacock (because there had been peacocks too, still were, come to that) settling on their sleeping minds as soft as rose-petals...

"Eh? Good heavens!" said the Major, astonished by this flight of fancy.

"Hm...actually, one of our guests wrote a sort of poem, you know, about how the place probably used to look in the old days. Lovely bit of work. Angela embroidered some of it for me on a cushion. I'll show it to you later on. I think you'll appreciate it."

"I'm sure I shall," agreed the Major.

The dog barked, doubtfully.

"What is it, Seán?"

A handsome, grinning young man had appeared on the steps that led up from one of the lower terraces. In his hand he swung a white feathered object which turned out to be a dead hen.

"Oh, he hasn't killed another, has he?" Edward grabbed the mutinous spaniel by the collar and thrust the chicken under its nose. The dog whined unhappily, averting its eyes. "I know the way to cure him of this. Get some twine, Seán, and tie the hen round his neck."

A few moments later the hen's neck had been tied to its legs and the dog, whose name was Rover, was shaking himself violently in an effort to rid himself of his heavy white boa. Then they walked on, the Major somewhat disturbed by this administration of justice.

Dinner that night closely resembled the lugubrious meal of the previous evening (old Mrs Rappaport once again stepping out of the broom-cupboard on the given signal) with, however, the important difference that Angela again failed to appear. Edward and Ripon faded away into the shadows after the meal, leaving the Major to play whist in the comparative comfort of the residents' lounge, in the company of Miss Porteous, Miss Archer and Mrs Rice. The ladies, though well muffled in shawls and cardigans, were nevertheless skewered at intervals by the invisible daggers of draughts leaking into the room from the many enormous windows. Whist continued until at length the Major's partner failed to respond to suggestions that it was her turn to play (he had been shuffling and dealing for each of them in turn). She had fallen asleep. Her companions interpreted this as a sign that it was time for bed and so they packed up swiftly, wishing the Major good night and leaving him with three unplayed aces.

Since it was early and he still felt wide awake he set off for a stroll, hands in pockets and whistling mournfully, through the deserted hotel rooms (he had taken to roaming about the house at will by now, no longer caring whether the Spencers might suppose that he was spying on them). Presently, on the first floor, he stumbled upon the Imperial Bar: curtains drawn and in total darkness, it was to all appearances just another empty room. Having felt his way cautiously inside, embracing on the way a slender lampstand which slipped between his outstretched arms to bump against his chest, he drew the curtains. Outside, a fortress of black clouds towered towards the Majestic from the west.

There was a faint mewing sound. A dark shadow slipped off the bar and approached him. It was the tortoiseshell cat, arching her back and rubbing herself against his ankle.

"So this is where you live, is it?"

On the bar he discovered an oil lamp which still contained a trace of oil. He turned up the wick and lit it. Behind the bar, ranks of bottles picked up the glimmer. Having vigorously dusted a brandy glass with his handkerchief he searched among the array of bottles until he found some cognac, poured himself a drink and went to stand by the window.

The light was poor by now. It had been raining heavily for some time. Nothing moved except for the occasional flutter of a bird, almost invisible against the background of leaves trembling under the downpour. The cat leaped up on to the sill and sat there looking out, its tail neatly curled around its feet.

Presently Edward materialized out of the rainy dusk that lay beyond the statue of Queen Victoria, followed at some distance by a whitish object that might have been a newspaper blown in the wind, rolling a few feet, halting, rolling forward again. The white object was Rover, still wearing the chicken round his neck. The Major sighed and took a sip of cognac.

Edward was clad in a streaming hat and sodden overcoat and seemed oblivious of the rain. The Major was appalled by his unexpected air of abandonment: it was as if he had received some terrible shock and no longer knew what he was doing. What on earth could be the matter? Rapping sharply on the window-pane, he shouted for Edward to come in out of the rain. But Edward failed to hear him. He continued his sightless walk,

sloshing through pools that lay here and there on the grass, then crunching his way over the gravel in the direction of the clump of lavender planted by his wife "before she died." At the lavender he froze into an attitude of despair. A little later Rover struggled up and under the impression that something was being hunted did his best to align him-self and the dead chicken in a pointing position. The master, the dog and the dead chicken remained there motionless as the rain pelted down on them in the gathering darkness.

The Major drank off the rest of his cognac, shuddered, and picked up the oil lamp to light his way to bed. In a day or two the Spencers would no longer be his affair. It was only when he was half-way up the stairs that he realized that he still had no sheets on his bed. And once again it was too late to do anything about it.

But a day or two passed and the Major was still at the Majestic. By now he had succeeded in doing something about the most obvious sources of misery (finding sheets, avoiding morning prayers by having breakfast in his room), but there was a sadness hanging in the empty rooms and corridors like an invisible gas which one could not help breathing.

Angela remained behind a closed door (it was impossible to tell which, there were so many) and was quite certainly ill, though nobody said so. Indeed, nobody made any reference to her at all in his presence. Perhaps they thought he would "understand"; perhaps they thought he had not even noticed that she was not there; perhaps this was the Spencers' method of dealing with unhappiness, by simply failing to mention it, as, in one of Angela's letters, a reference to the dog called Spot (who had presumably been carried off by distemper) had been omitted. At this moment, for all the Major knew, Edward was compiling lists of the living beings at the Majestic which failed to mention his daughter Angela.

One day, passing through the Palm Court on his way to the Imperial Bar, which he had taken to sharing with the tortoiseshell cat, he heard an elderly lady, a new arrival, asking in a ringing whisper if that was poor Angela's unfortunate young man. Turning involuntarily, he had been met by a battery of pitying, interested glances.

Once or twice again (in truth, several times), before or after meals, he had met the cook on the stairs carrying the invalid's tray. Whether she was struggling up or down the stairs it seemed to make very little difference, he noticed, to the amount of food on the plate. Only, coming down, the meat and vegetables might be somewhat disarranged, mixed up together, one might suppose, by a listless hand. And a fork might be lying on the plate, though the knife was rarely touched; most often, on the way down, it lay beside the plate, clean and shining as it had been on the way up. Similarly, the apple on the tray usually made the return journey with its skin unflawed; if baked, though, with custard, it might be squashed a little or the meat dug out of the skin and spattered with the yellow, viscous fluid; if stewed and sprinkled with brown sugar as much as half of it might disappear. Apples—after all, there was a mountain of them in the apple house which had to be eaten—played a significant part in the diet of those living at the Majestic. One day, however, he noticed a raw apple travelling upstairs that looked so fresh and shining that it might even have been an early arrival of the new season's crop. On the way down it was still there on the tray but one despairing bite had been taken out of it. He could see the marks of small teeth that had clipped a shallow oval furrow from its side, the exposed white flesh already beginning to oxidize and turn brown, like an old photograph or love-letter. He was extremely moved by this single bite and wanted to say something. He paused and almost spoke, but the cook, as if in fear, was already hastening clumsily down the stairs away from him. Every time they met on the stairs now she would nervously avoid his eye and once or twice she even blushed deeply, as if she had caught him doing something indecent. And it was true that he had become fascinated with this tray and often tried to be on the stairs when it was going up or down. Usually, though, he tried to limit himself to one casual, greedy glance that would note everything.

Most afternoons, he would take a walk with Edward here or there in the Majestic's immense grounds accompanied by four or five of the dogs, freed for the occasion and ecstatic, leaping and bounding, chasing birds or butterflies over the meadows or through the trees, delirious with their sudden freedom. Very often the dog Rover would struggle along obstinately behind them, stopping and starting like a blown newspaper, the no-longer-white hen swinging from his neck, scarcely able to keep up, he and the hen getting caught in a hedge from time to time or having to be helped over a stone wall.

Edward was unpredictable. Sometimes he would say nothing at all for the duration of the walk. At other times he delivered ringing speeches on a general topic, usually to do with Ireland, the state of the country, the impossibility of making progress in a country ridden with priests, superstitions and laziness, the "blighter Redmond" who had put ideas into people's heads, the cynical indifference of Westminster to the Unionist predicament, the splendid example of Sir Edward Carson and his militia in the north...Did the people of Ireland want to govern themselves? They most certainly did not. They knew on which side their bread was buttered. Ask any decent Irishman what he thinks and he'll answer the same thing. It was only criminals, fanatics, and certain people with a grudge who were interested in starting trouble. I ask you, is Murphy capable of governing himself? He couldn't even govern his Aunt Fanny! The "decent" Irish (they were ninety-nine per cent according to Edward) were still friendly to the British and as appalled as anyone by the outrages that occurred every now and again.

But on the day after Edward made this claim the Major read in the *Irish Times*:

> Exciting scenes in which baton and bayonet charges were a feature took place at Newtownbarry, Co. Wexford, following the arrest shortly after midnight of John Mahon, a small farmer, living at Gurteen, about a mile outside the town. When the police arrived at the barracks with the prisoner they were hissed and booed by a crowd of over three hundred people, accompanied by the members of the local brass band who started to play...Some of the civilians ran away but the majority remained and a struggle between the crowd and the police ensued. The latter used their batons freely while the members of the band employed their instruments with which to beat the police.

The Major smiled when he had read this and thought: "How splendidly Irish! The brass band fighting the police with their instruments! I wish I'd been there." All the same, it was hard to avoid the conclusion that Edward was exaggerating the number of "decent" Irish. And since Newtownbarry was hardly any distance from Kilnalough surely there was cause for concern here too? But the Major was not concerned, at least not for the time being. For the moment he was merely diverted by the spectacle of the Irish behaving as Irishmen are supposed to behave.

The Major laughed aloud. But a day or two later there was a more sombre description of how the crowd had jeered at District Inspector Hunt as he lay dying on the street in Thurles, having been shot from behind. The Major was busy however, and hardly glanced at it. He had made up his mind to tackle Edward about Angela.

Though she was certainly ill, perhaps it was nothing too serious. On the other hand, she was eating so little that at this rate she might starve herself to death. He must know the truth. He was on the point of asking a direct question when Edward said gruffly: "Look here, Brendan, I'd like to thank you for all you're doing in these...well, trying circumstances. No, no, don't say a word...I know how it is. I just want to say that I appreciate it, that's all."

The Major stared at him in astonishment. *What* was he doing? And *what* were the "trying circumstances"? Once again he was about to ask, bluntly, make an end of the mystery and get down to brass tacks...But Edward was visibly moved; the harsh lines of his face had softened, reminding the Major of how he had looked the other evening standing under the downpour in an attitude of despair. How defenceless one is when one is beginning to get old in a country where they are killing the policemen, with a son agin the government, with a daughter ill in bed! Later he realized that he really should have spoken up (by that time it was too late, naturally) because his position had become more delicate than ever. Supposing that, without realizing it, he should stop doing "all that he was doing" (whatever it was), or just as bad, once the "trying circumstances" were over, should continue doing it, thereby revealing that he had not been doing it deliberately. He shook his head sadly (but could not help smiling) over this absurd situation.

* * *

BUY VICTORY LOAN!

> "We have won the fight, but we have gone into debt in buying the 'gloves.' It was a glorious fight for humanity, but the creditors call regularly for interest on the loan nevertheless. They are about to demand the whole amount...hundreds of millions of pounds fall due for payment within the next few years."

HELP YOUR COUNTRY OUT!

* * *

Two or three of the elderly ladies who resided permanently at the Majestic had approached the Major to ask his advice on the Victory Loan, alarmed at the thought that England had got herself into debt (although, of course, in a perfectly respectable way). But the Major disappointed them. He listened politely, of course, but his indifference was plainly visible. He contented himself with murmuring: "Afraid I don't know much about that sort of thing. Perhaps Edward or, let me see, that bank-manager fellow Devlin might be able to give you some tips." To tell the truth, the ladies were somewhat distressed by his attitude; after all, in a manner of speaking the "gloves" had been bought expressly for his use. They retired with tight lips and the ill-defined but somehow distinct impression that the Major, in spite of all the evidence to the contrary, suffered from a lack of patriotism.

This impression was reinforced when, with glistening eyes, Miss Johnston read aloud to Miss Devere, Mrs Rice, and Miss Staveley an account of the Great Victory Parade. "The faultless alignment, perfect unison of step, the smartness with which salutes were given and eyes righted, was a matter of general comment. Demobilized men in 'civvies' were plentiful, and, in spite of orders to the contrary, they could not refrain in the majority of instances from lifting their hats in homage to the King." But the Major, slumped in an armchair, was observed to have a dazed and listless expression on his face as he listened (there was no option) to Miss Johnston's ringing tones echoing through the residents' lounge.

"On they marched, through the Mall, Admiralty Arch, Fleet Street, Ludgate Circus, St Paul's Churchyard, Cannon Street and Queen Victoria Street to the Mansion House where the crowd was densest. A pandemonium

of cheering greeted every detachment...”

A thick blue cloud of tobacco smoke was to be seen swirling around the Major’s armchair when Miss Johnston next glanced up. The ladies exchanged significant glances when it had cleared. The Major had vanished.

As it happened, the Major had vanished on an important mission. He really *had* to find out what was wrong with Angela, otherwise he might find himself here for weeks! He had resolved to cultivate the cook, spend sufficient time with her to get to understand her dialect, accent, or speech-infirmity, whichever it was (he suspected that there might be something wrong with her palate), and then find out how things stood.

But this plan was a failure. He made a sudden appear-ance in the kitchen and began the sort of cheerful, slightly roguish banter which he expected would be irresistible to a fat Irish cook, ignoring her unintelligible (though clearly embarrassed) replies. He had somehow seen himself sitting on the edge of the table and swinging a leg as he chatted, winking a great deal, chaffing the cook about her boy-friends, stealing strawberries—or, at any rate, apples, of which there was a better supply—dipping his finger into bowls of sugar-icing and being chased laughing out of the kitchen with a rolling-pin. It soon became clear, however, that the cook was paralysed with embarrassment in his presence, flushing horribly and looking round for some place of escape. Anyone might have thought he was some kind of sexual deviate the way she behaved! It was simply no use at all. He was obliged to give up almost as soon as he had begun, afraid that the stupid woman might give notice or tell Edward that he had been molesting her. In future he thought it best not to nod to her when they passed on the stairs (though he could not prevent himself from glancing greedily at the tray as usual).

There were two other ways in which he could find out about Angela: one was to ask Ripon, the other was to ask the doctor. But Ripon was plainly avoiding him (the Major’s brusque manner had evidently offended him) and, besides, he spent a great deal of time away from the Majestic. The doctor was another matter. He had taken to visiting every day now, usually in the morning or afternoon but sometimes even quite late at night. Long after the great building had been steeped for hours in darkness and silence and he had assumed everyone to be fast asleep the Major, sitting in the Imperial Bar with the tortoiseshell cat on his lap and reading a book with the oil lamp at his elbow, would hear the deep chug of the doctor’s motor as it swept up the drive spraying gravel. At the window he would see Edward leaving the porch with short, anxious steps, carrying a lantern to light the old man’s laborious progress from motor car to door.

These visits normally took a long time. The reason was that Dr Ryan, however alert his mind, had to cope with a body so old and worn out as to be scarcely animate. Watching him climb the stairs towards his patient was like watch-ing the hands of a clock: he moved so slowly that he might not have been moving at all. One day the Major saw him on his way upstairs, clinging to the banister as a snail clings to the bark of a tree. After he had smoked a cigarette and glanced through the newspaper he happened to pass through the foyer again and there was the doctor, still clinging to the banister and still apparently not moving, but nevertheless much nearer to the top. The Major shook his head and hoped that it was not an emergency.

After his visit to Angela (though no one admitted that this was the purpose of his ascent) the same process of clinging to the banister would be gone through in reverse. Afterwards he would doze in an armchair in the Palm Court or the residents’ lounge and around him would gather a group of chattering old ladies who looked, by contrast to his immense age, as sprightly and exuberant as young girls. And maybe, reflected the Major, in Dr Ryan’s presence they did become a little intoxicated with their youth again. He found it touching, this recovery of youth, and enjoyed hearing them chatter in this girlish and charming way and thought that, after all, there is not so very much difference between an old lady and a young girl, only a few years diluting the exuberance with weariness, sadness, and a great sensitivity to draughts.

However, the presence of the old ladies made it a little difficult for the Major to bring up the subject of Angela. And perhaps, too, the doctor resented their enjoyment of his extreme old age, because one day, after his usual ascent of the stairs, he was to be found in none of his usual haunts. Disconsolate, petulant and elderly, the ladies took their knitting from one room to another and back again...but in vain. The old man had disappeared.

The Major, however, soon came upon him (though by accident) while searching for the place where the tortoiseshell cat, who had grown suddenly and eloquently thinner, was hiding her kittens. He was dozing in a wicker chair in the breakfast room behind a great oriental screen inlaid with mother-of-pearl dragons, pagodas and sampans. Seizing his chance the Major said: “How is she, Doctor?”

“Eh?” The old man started guiltily. “Ah, it’s you.” Reaching out with a blue-veined, freckled hand, he dragged the Major down into another wicker chair at his side. “It’s nothing. Nothing serious. A chill. Touch of fever. But that’s nothing...It’s her future here in this town that I’m worried about. Her father has no guts. She’s a fine girl but what will become of her? She’s of a different metal from the rest.”

“I’m glad to hear it’s not serious,” replied the Major, surprised to hear the doctor say that Edward had no guts. There was a silence, broken at length by the doctor saying with a sigh: “Why are you young men so stupid? You’d marry her if you had any sense. What’s your name, did you say?”

“Brendan Archer.”

“He’s as spineless as jelly. What’ll become of the girl? Ireland is no place for a girl like her with a bit of spirit...”

The doctor's eyelids stole down over his eyeballs and he slept, or seemed to sleep. The Major told himself that this was the news he had been waiting for, that he was liberated, that since Angela was only suffering from a chill she would surely be up and about again in a day or two so that everything could be settled. He got to his feet quietly so as not to disturb Dr Ryan, but the old man was awake and watch-ing him.

"Don't tell them where I am, Mr Archer. Ach! Old women!" And he chuckled faintly, with disgust. "She's the only one worth a farthing in the whole of County Wexford," he muttered, half to himself. "What fools!" He paused and sighed heavily once more. "The English are fools; they'll lose Ireland if they go on like this. Do they even want it? Do they even know what they want? Ach, the Protestants will die of fright in their beds and serve them right!"

One afternoon, tired of sitting in the Imperial Bar reading the newspaper while the kittens played with his shoelaces and romped on the carpet, the Major set out for a walk in the company of Haig, a red setter. On his way across the fields he passed the grey stone buildings that before he had only seen from a distance, pointed out to him by Edward as the home of his ungrateful tenants. There was no sign of life: a dilapidated farmhouse built of loosely matched grey stones rising out of a yard of dried mud, once grass perhaps but long since worn into deep ruts. For a moment he considered having a look round, but as he climbed over a stile and made his way along the edge of a cornfield (the corn was still as green as grass) a dog started barking angrily; then another took up the cry, and another, and he imagined he could see a grim face staring at him from a window, and then, all around him, dragging on chains somewhere out of sight behind walls, beyond hedges, inside closed doors, a whole pack of dogs was fiendishly barking.

After he had crossed two more fields and a stream a gravel road came into sight which the Major judged would take him into Kilnalough. The day had turned chilly now that the sun was declining. The thin grey smoke of turf-fires rose from one or two of the chimneys of Kilnalough, very faint against the opal sky to the west where there were no clouds; the horizon looked very cold and clear, as if it were already winter. He shivered. Winter 1919. A peacetime winter: skating on frozen ponds, roasted chestnuts? He had forgotten what winter in peacetime was like and through the unbroken bubble of bitterness in his mind, inches thick like plate glass, he tried to visualize it. But the war was still there. He had not yet finished with it. Although he no longer attended morning prayers to be confronted by the photographs from Edward's memorial, there were other photographs, smudged and accusing, that still continued even now to appear on the front page of the *Weekly Irish Times*. The harvest was not yet complete. And what about the survivors? The pathetic letters inquiring about pensions and employment printed in "Our Servicemen's Bureau" and signed WHIZZ BANG, DUBLIN TOMMY, DELVILLE WOOD, 1916, IMPERIAL RULE, DUBLIN and suchlike? When would it all be finished and forgotten?

On his way down the main street he was hailed by a man whom he at first did not recognize. Nearer at hand, though, he recalled the dapper appearance and the obsequious smile: it was Mr Devlin, Sarah's father. He had been spotted by Sarah from her bedroom window. She was bored and had nothing to do, confined to bed by a slight chill, it was nothing really, the doctor said, but the Major knew how young people were... they were inclined to be fretful. She was over the worst, of course, thanks very much, but she was so highly strung...In short, she had asked him to ask the Major, if it wouldn't be too much of an imposition (he needn't stay more than a minute—it was more for the sake of variety than anything else) if he wouldn't mind stopping by for a chat...just to say "Hello."

"I'd be delighted. I'm afraid the dog is rather muddy, though."

"Well, we could shut him up somewhere," replied Mr Devlin, looking at the dog with distaste. He led the way through a side door of the bank.

"Careful he doesn't gobble up all your bank-notes," laughed the Major as the dog shook itself and frisked cheerfully about the room. Mr Devlin did not appear to find this funny, however; indeed, he looked quite upset. The dog was shut in the kitchen and the Major was shown upstairs to the room where, propped against pillows, her eyes shining, her cheeks flushed and looking, as her father had said, fretful, Sarah was waiting for him.

"I'll be downstairs," Mr Devlin said, adding with a cough: "I'll leave this door open in case you need anything." And he withdrew. They could hear his footsteps descending the stairs.

"Well, what's this I hear about you being sick? You've had a chill, I understand, but you're better now. I must say you look as if you're sparkling with health."

"Major, do stop talking nonsense and come and sit down. Here on the bed...don't worry, I won't bite you. And where's the lovely dog you were with? It was really the dog I wanted to see, not you. And now I suppose you'll be thinking it was for yourself. Men are so conceited, young as I am that's one thing I've found out. And you needn't bother to contradict me, Major, because I *know* it's true, and I'm perfectly sure that you're more conceited than anyone, I can tell instantly by that absurd moustache you have on your lip, it's written all over your face, not to mention your ridiculous 'ramrod posture' which is the most arrogant thing I ever saw in my life. Why can't you let yourself droop a bit like a normal person? Well, it's none of my business, thank heaven. And you needn't smile like that either in that condescending way you have, as if I know nothing at all because I'm a country girl. I'm sure you think I'm a complete fool who knows nothing at all; I expect you're used to

these young women they have in England who paint their faces and stay out all night—the magazines are full of talk of such creatures—smearing paint on one's skin, I must say it sounds disgusting!" And she laughed, a trifle hysterically.

"Dogs? Painted women? Really, what nonsense you talk. I think you must be more ill than I supposed."

"When I saw you walking down the street (look, from the window I can just see people passing by) I said to myself: 'There goes that absurd English person with a beautiful dog. How nice it would be to have a chat with him...' But now you're here I can't think of a single thing to say and I can't imagine for the life of me why a few moments ago I wanted to talk to you...But never mind, I shall make the best of it and surely think of something. And there you sit looking uncomfortable and really it almost looks as if your hand is sitting beside you, it hardly looks like a hand at all; it looks like some big leathery creature, like a toad or something, and it looks so rough and dry, is the other one the same? Yes, I can see that it is. They look as if they're made of leather dried out in the sun...You know, Brendan (I shall call you Brendan since I no longer recognize the British Army which is a force of occupation in Ireland against the wishes of the people, you don't mind, do you?), when I was a child I used to dream that I was lying in bed with a toad sitting on my chest and although that sounds rather frightful it was really a pleasant, warm feeling. This toad used to be a particular friend of mine, I wish I could have dreams like that now. But tell me (I mustn't bore you with my childhood or else you'll make some excuse and hurry away), tell me why you were looking so miserable when you were walking along. Has Angela been making you miserable? But no, don't tell me, because I really don't want to know anything about your private affairs. They're of no concern to me, you'd simply be wasting my time. Instead I shall tell you something about Ireland since you clearly know nothing. Have you even heard of the Easter Rebellion in Dublin?"

Of course he had heard of it, he assured her smiling. That was the treacherous attack by Irish hooligans on the British Army so busily engaged in defending Ireland against the Kaiser.

"Did Ireland ask to be defended?"

"Whether they asked for it or not they obviously wanted it, since so many Irishmen were fighting in the army."

"Obviously? Nothing was less obvious! The Irish people weren't even consulted. No one asked them anything. Why should it make any difference to them whether they were invaded by the Germans or by the British? It might even be better to be subject to the Germans; at least it would make a change..." And the Major was quite wrong in saying that the heroes of the Easter Rising were hooligans. On the contrary, there were many gentlemen among these patriots. Did he know nothing at all? How ignorant the English (only politeness, she laughed, prevented her from saying "the enemy"), how ignorant the English were. Had he even heard of the débutante Countess Markievicz who with a pistol in her belt defended the College of Surgeons and was sentenced to death for shooting at a gentleman looking out of the window of the Unionist Club (even though the shot missed)? Or did he think that Joseph Plunkett, jewels flaring on his fingers like a Renaissance prince and who *was,* in fact, the son of a papal count, did he think that this man was a hooligan? Already doomed with T.B., he had got up out of his bed to fight; did that make him sound like a treacherous criminal? Did the Major know that Joseph Plunkett got married to Grace Gifford (a beautiful young aristocrat whose Protestant family disowned her, naturally, the pigs) by the light of a candle held by a British soldier in the chapel of Kilmainham gaol in the early hours of the morning shortly before he faced a firing-squad? Did *that* sound like the behaviour of a hooligan?

"Indeed, no," said the Major smiling. "It sounds more like the last act of an opera composed by a drunken Italian librettist."

"Ah, it's impossible to argue with someone so cynical!"

"But you ask me to believe in these operatic characters when one reads entirely different things in the newspaper. Just the other day I was reading about a woman who had pig rings put in her buttocks for supplying milk to the police...and then there was the brass band that started a rough house with the police, using their instruments as clubs... and a donkey stabbed to death for carrying turf to the R.I.C. barracks and labelled as a traitor to Ireland!"

"Such things are invented by the British to discredit us. We've no way of knowing whether the newspapers tell the truth. Everything belongs to the British in Ireland. Everything."

There was silence for a moment. Sarah's flush had faded but she still looked rather fretful. She said abruptly: "Did you know that Edward thinks you a cold person, Brendan?"

"No, I didn't know that," said the Major, surprised.

"I think it's because you're always so very polite and distant." She smiled at the Major's look of concern and shook her head. "However, I told him I thought quite the opposite ...in fact, I told him I thought you were probably as soft as a steamed pudding."

"That doesn't sound very complimentary, I must say. But how do you know what Edward thinks of me? You said he was always unfriendly to you. I thought you never saw him."

"Oh, in Kilnalough one meets everyone," Sarah said vaguely. "One couldn't avoid people even if one wanted to. Now do stop looking so uneasy. Close the door and come and sit here on the bed. Don't be silly, you don't have to be paying any attention to *him* (my father, I mean)...What, you're off already? Don't say I've offended you *again*!" And she broke into peals of laughter that rang pleasantly in the Major's ears all the way

home.

But before he reached the Majestic a disturbing thought occurred to him. Could it be that Dr Ryan had been talking about Sarah and not about Angela with his “chill” and his “touch of fever” and his “father as spineless as jelly”? If that were so, poor Angela might be gravely ill after all. And the more he thought about it the more likely it seemed.

“Well,” said Ripon, who was drunk. “It was the most farcical business I’ve ever seen in my life. It happened right after the Soloheadbeg affair, which was the first of many attacks on the peelers, and, as you might expect, indignation and patriotism were running high. There we are, all sitting at the dinner table munching peacefully when suddenly Himself stands up and says in ringing tones: ‘I intend to go into Kilnalough this evening to have a drink and show the flag. Any of you men who care to join me will be most welcome.’ Well, a hush falls, nobody says a word...‘Ripon, how about you?’ Needless to say, I had no appetite for such a reckless venture. Himself puts on a contemptuous expression and says: ‘Very well, if no one cares to join me I shall go by myself.’ We’re all looking rather sheepish—at least I was—but inwardly heaving a sigh of relief (lucky for you, Major, that you weren’t staying here at the time; you don’t look to me like a man who could resist a call on his patriotism) when lo and behold, from a shadowy table at the other end of the dining-room a voice pipes up, thin, quavering, but determined. It’s Miss Johnston. ‘I shall accompany you, Mr Spencer!’ Everyone is dumbfounded. ‘And I shall come too!’ cries Miss Staveley. And soon everyone is clamouring and even Mr Porter, whose wife had volunteered, is carried away by the general enthusiasm and changes his mind. And so Himself rather reluctantly found himself at the head of a party of old ladies—there must have been a good half-dozen of them—plus the doddering old Porter and plus, finally, having scented a splendid fiasco on the wind, myself.

“By the time we arrived, of course, everyone including me was practically fainting with terror (too bad you weren’t there, Major, since you’re obviously abnormally brave when it comes to a rough house). Byrne’s pub isn’t such a bad place, though nobody, mind you, would think of going there unless for the purpose of harassing the natives, nobody from the Majestic anyway. A bit ramshackle, perhaps, with its thatched roof and stone walls. There was a rank, beery smell from the open door which made the ladies wrinkle their noses.

“I hadn’t ever been in there before so I had a look round (looking for the safest place in case there was a scrap, you know, Major, not being a brave and manly fellow like you). Dark, low ceiling, shabby, sawdust on the floor, chairs and tables all wooden, a bit of stench coming from the old *ghuslkhana* (as Father insists on calling it), a long mirror over the bar badly in need of silvering, and propped against it, beside a plaster statue of Johnny Walker with cane and monocle, a calendar or something with one of those frightfully gruesome Sacred Hearts on it. I think there were probably some wilted tulips in a jam jar in front of it.

“Oh, look! I’ve forgotten that there was another man in our party, that frightful tutor fellow Evans, who’s always lurking in the shadows. Actually, on this occasion he was as keen as mustard. As soon as he heard what Himself was planning he volunteered right away, could hardly restrain the chappie from leaping at the first native we saw. Anyway, there he was looking around keenly, frightfully belligerent (you’d have been delighted with him, Major, I’m sure; no white feathers for old Evans), but fortunately none of the locals seemed anxious to let him fracture their jaws.

“In fact, everything was quite peaceful. Surprising number of people there, sitting around or leaning on the bar, men for the most part. A couple of haggard and blowsy women at one of the tables, some men playing cards at another, an old crone by the fire with a big glass of porter beside her. Everyone had obviously been having a jolly good time until we showed up. But now there was Himself, standing there like that terrifying stone statue that turns up at the feast at the end of *Don Giovanni* to deal with the rotter who’s been tampering with everyone’s daughters! It was most alarming, Major, I can assure you (though naturally it wouldn’t have been alarming for a man of your moral fibre). So Himself goes clanking across the room to a big table in the very middle at which there was nobody except a toothless, wrinkled old man. This old codger had his white head lowered over an immense mug from which he was supping liquid with a faint whistling noise. As he came up for breath he inhaled his shaggy brown moustache and sucked it white and dry before lowering his head again. This fellow took to his heels when he saw the stone statue approaching. Can’t say I blame him, actually.

“Chairs were found and we all sat down. ‘Could we have some service please,’ demanded the Man of Stone in a voice from Beyond the Tomb. A perspiring red-faced chap in an apron scurried out from behind the bar wiping his hands.

“Silence still gripped the room, Major, like a heavy frost. Everyone at our table was wondering why ‘they’ didn’t start talking again, in respectful undertones, of course. Suddenly one of the men at the bar snorted into his glass, sending a great brown spray over his neighbours, hanging on helplessly to the brass rail, barking again and again with uncontrollable laughter, gasping so desperately for air that for a while it wasn’t clear that it was laughter and not some dreadful epileptic fit he was having. Little by little, though, his need for air strangled his merriment and he was led outside, half drowned, by one of his companions, who then returned alone. After this some of the other men were obviously having trouble keeping their faces straight; on every side faces were long and solemn, tight as violin strings. (It was awful, Major, you’ve no idea.) The restrained

laughter bulged like an abscess in the room. At any moment one had the feeling that the wretched thing might burst with a loud report and drench us all with the yellow pus of laughter (sorry about some of these metaphors, Major, I'm doing m'best). One could feel it coming, that terrible, cataclysmic burst of laughter...

"At this point Himself, alone in the silence, stood up and began to sing:

'GodSaveourGraciousKing
LongliveourNobleKing
GodSavetheKing.'

The other members of the Majestic party were now on their feet. Two or three of the ladies, their voices reedy and defiant, joined in here and fluted:

'Sendhimvictor-rious
Happyandglor-rious
LongtoreignOh!-verus
Go-od sa-ave the King.'

(Oh, Major, you can't imagine what it was like! Your hackles would have bristled with pride at that dear uplifting sound!)

"Well, an instant of silence followed. Then it came: a great rolling storm of applause, of laughter, of clapping and crying and cheering. The noise was positively deafening. The skin that covered that straining, bulging tension in the room had broken and the relief was divine, Major. Even I was applauding.

"The Man of Stone and the ladies, however, looked far from pleased at this favourable reception. Their faces darkened, the Man of Stone grimly licked his granite lips while the ladies elevated their rheumy eyes to a more noble, uncompromising angle than ever. What was to be done? Hardly had the cascade of applause begun to subside when the Man of Stone, marble nostrils quivering, launched once more into the National Anthem, singing the same verse as before (I suppose there *are* others, you're the sort of chap, Major, who'd be likely to know about that sort of thing, but never mind for the moment.)

"This time not only the contingent from the Majestic but also some throaty tenors from the bar joined in, raising their foaming tankards and showing a tendency, common to many Irishmen when singing, to warble sentimentally and allow their eyes to fill with tears. In our party at that moment, Major, muscles were tensing, necks were growing red, veins were bulging, fists were being clenched. Evans, the appalling tutor-wallah, in particular, looked as if he were about to swoon in an ecstasy of hate and violence if he didn't get to bash someone up pretty quickly.

"Now everyone was singing, not just a few drunken tenors at the bar. It was wonderful, the way everyone was singing together. And, not content with singing, a young fellow wearing a cap much too big for him and baggy trousers that looked as if they'd been made out of potato sacks jumped up on a stool and began to conduct, now the Man of Stone, now the chorus at the bar.

"The applause once again was deafening. The Man of Stone was by now looking a tiny bit defeated. He stood perfectly still for a moment, head just a little bowed. Then he fumbled in his pocket and dropped a handful of silver on the table beside his untouched glass of stout. After that he turned and clanked stiffly towards the open door, with his dignified platoon of elderly ladies trailing behind him.

"Well, we all trooped back to where we'd left the motors and for a while nobody said a word. We just stood there waiting for everyone to get in the motor cars until one of the ladies said: 'You know, I think they were making fun of us.' Well, nobody had anything to say to that, so I said (hoping to make things better, Major, you realize): 'Couldn't it be that they just enjoyed singing and that was the only song we all knew?' But that didn't seem to help at all.

"It was then we realized that there was a bit of a scuffle going on. Evans had hung back looking for someone to punch in order to avenge the slight on Himself's honour. But in a moment or two he was bundled out by two or three grinning natives with his jacket pulled over his head like a strait-jacket. And that was that. He wasn't thanked for this splendid bit of loyalty. Himself told him angrily to get in the motor and stop playing the fool. Himself and I were the last to climb in, watched by all the drinkers who'd come pouring out of the pub and stood watching us from the door. Himself looked back at them, you know, and just for a moment it occurred to me—there was something about the expression on his face—that he was afraid of them, and I felt a bit sorry for him. But now, Major, I'm afraid you'll have to pardon me a for moment while I go and vomit—I should think probably into yonder pot of ferns would be the best idea. I realize it's a rotten show, mind you (particularly to a man like yourself who's frightfully good at holding his drink)..."

* * *

GRAFTON PICTURE HOUSE

The principal film exhibited in the Grafton Picture House was one in which Charles Ray and Frank Keenan appear, "The Coward," a dramatic episode of the American Civil War. It is a story of a man who

was a coward, but who, when the test came, proved himself as ready to fight and die for his country as the most hardened soldier, and it possessed those essentials which make a picture interesting.

* * *

At a meeting in Belfast on July 12th (the anniversary of the Battle of the Boyne) Sir Edward Carson said: "And now there are only two policies before the country... One is the maintenance of the Union and loyalty to the King and the other is (God bless the mark!) an Irish Republic. An Irish Republic with your hats off to the President, Mr De Valera (laughter), who is now working against you in America, with the help of the Catholic Hierarchy in that country, backed up by the Catholic Hierarchy in this and all other countries, and who imagines, in his vanity, that one day or the other, he is going to march through Belfast and Ulster (cries of "Never!") and you will all willingly take off your hats ("No!") and bow the knee to the head of the organization which, in the darkest hour of the war of the world's freedom, shot His Majesty's soldiers in the streets of Dublin. I invite Mr De Valera to come to Ulster and I undertake that he will get a proper Ulster welcome. An Irish Republic! What is the good of the British Empire as compared with an Irish Republic? Just imagine how small the British Empire will look when the Irish Republic is established, and just imagine how the British Navy will bow their heads in shame when they see two canal boats with the Irish Sinn Fein flag (laughter) and Admiral Devlin (laughter) bringing them into action at Scapa Flow. Yes, but there is more than that. I talk of the men sleeping their last sleep on the plains of Flanders and France, in Mesopotamia and Palestine, in the Balkans and elsewhere—the men who have done their share, not for the Irish Republic, but for the great British Empire...and, forsooth, the reward we are to have is that we are to give up all that we have won, and we are to be false and untrue to all that they suffered, in order that these rebels, prompted by ambitions of trampling upon the Protestants of the North of Ireland, may have a dot on the map which might be represented by a pinprick...I tell the British people from this platform here, in your presence today—and I say it now with all solemnity—I tell them that if there is any attempt made to take away one jot or tittle of your rights as British citizens, and the advantages which have been won in this war of freedom, I tell them, at all consequences, once more I will call out the Ulster Volunteers (cheers). I call an Ulsterman, an Ulsterman. I call a Sinn Feiner, a rebel. I call Dominion Home Rule the *camouflage* of an Irish Republic..."

* * *

It was now the middle of July and the Major had decided to leave Kilnalough. Enough, after all, was enough. It was his intention to tell Edward that he would not be coming back, that he had been called away on some rather permanent business and would be leaving for England (if not somewhere more remote). But Edward looked so upset when he mentioned his departure, running his fingers through his hair and saying: "Of course, I'm afraid it's not much fun for you being here..." deaf to his protestations that that wasn't the reason he was going (although of course, it *was*), that in the event he found himself hurriedly revising his prepared speech, saying that he was merely going to Dublin for a week and that the reason he was going...He paused in desperation, unable to think of a reason. But at this point a miracle occurred. Edward's face brightened. Patting the Major on the back he said: "Of course, of course, my dear fellow, I know perfectly well. You want to see the Peace Day parade on the nineteenth; I only wish I could come with you. Love to see it myself, but I'm afraid I can't leave my post. Will you be marching yourself? No? I hear that French is going to take the salute. He was asked to march with Haig in London but turned them down. That's the spirit. But look here, I must see if I can wangle you a room in Jury's. You should get a good view from there. Otherwise you won't be able to see a thing..." The result was that the Major was thoroughly dissatisfied with himself as he boarded the train that stood hissing in Kilnalough station; he had left himself the cowardly task of explaining by letter that his temporary visit to Dublin had become permanent.

Just before the train pulled out there was a commotion on the platform as a late-arriving passenger scurried out of the ticket office laden with a brief-case and bulging packages, and attended by the station master and a porter. The Major just caught a glimpse of some battered suitcases and the gaunt, wild-eyed face of "the friend of Parnell" as he struggled past the window. But the old fellow clambered into a third-class compartment and the Major saw no more of him. He remembered however, having heard the distant rumble of a violent argument the previous evening as he sat with a lapful of kittens in the Imperial Bar—Edward's harsh and angry tones filtering through walls and floorboards in the hush of evening. No doubt that was the reason for his departure.

All afternoon the sun shone steadily on lettuce-green leaves. The Major sat beside the open window in a pleasant daze, allowing the wind to ruffle his hair, catching now and then a breath of warm grass or the cool moisture from some bubbling stream. Soon the warmth made him drowsy and his thoughts slipped away into the heart of this golden afternoon. Half asleep, with the sunlight swilling like molten gold on the floor of the compartment, with blue smoke from his pipe swirling here and there in the breeze, he at last allowed himself to relax and felt himself at peace. Presently he knocked out his pipe, put it in his pocket and fell asleep. Slowly the feeling of peace dissolved. Beneath the shadows of his lowered eyelids tattered figures crawled

towards him, pallid and speechless, through a desolate countryside.

On Saturday, the day reserved for the celebration of "Peace" throughout the Empire, the streets of Dublin were crowded from an early hour. Over the past three days the Major had seen the grey buildings of the city gradually blossoming into colour as flags were hung from windows and arches of bunting were stretched across the main thorough-fares. Now, in Sackville Street, the Union Jack, the Stars and Stripes, and the Italian flag floated from the ruined walls of the General Post Office; another immense Union Jack flew from the top of Trinity College while from the banks and brokerage houses lining College Green fluttered a thick tapestry of banners. It was here in front of the Bank of Ireland (a number of soldiers were already on duty guarding its roof) that the Viceregal Stand had been set up beneath a red-and-white canopy surrounded by gold-tipped staves. On this platform the Lord Lieutenant, his staff, and various Government officials would presently make their appearance; on the other side of the railings, in the courtyard of the bank, two more wooden platforms had been constructed for the wounded, to allow them an unimpeded view of this historic pageant. Beside them massed bands had been assembled, their instruments winking in the sunshine.

Although Edward, as good as his word, had procured a room for the Major with a window overlooking Dame Street (affording him a splendid view of the route that the parade would take), shortly after eleven o'clock he became restless and made his way out to the street. Above him the windows and balconies of College Green were packed with eager faces. Ladies and gentlemen had crowded on to the roof of Trinity College. People clung to parapets or precariously embraced chimney-pots. The statue of King William, horse and rider, was festooned with patriots. Red, white and blue rosettes or miniature Union Jacks glowed in every lapel as the Major forced his way through the excited throng.

By now only the most important places in the Viceregal Stand remained empty. At any moment the pageant would begin, the triumphant apotheosis of the Empire's struggle for Peace. A boy had climbed one of the tramway poles on the pavement and was shouting hysterically, signalling the approach of four motor cars from the direction of Westmoreland Street. An open motor with a grim-looking cargo of police dashed past. Then the Major just managed to catch a glimpse of a second motor as a tremendous roar broke out. He had arrived!

Standing on tiptoe (luckily he was taller than anyone around him) the Major craned forward to see through the waving forest of hats and caps. The dense crowd by the railings of the Bank of Ireland was stirring violently. A number of tall policemen were to be seen fraying a passage for the new arrival who still remained invisible. Very faintly, beneath the continuous cheering, the Major could make out the thud of drums; the bands were playing "God Save the King." And still he had not come into view. So thick was the crowd, so great their enthusiasm to catch a glimpse of the celebrity who was making his slow and dignified way through the tunnel of their waving, clutching hands, that a way had to be brutally forced through them. For he must not be touched: that much was clear. An assassin might have positioned himself in the great man's path. A suddenly drawn revolver, a hastily pulled trigger...what a blow struck for Sinn Fein! But now the violently stirring whirlpool of heads had almost reached the steps up to the Viceregal Stand. Any second now and he would climb into view...

Abruptly, he was there! The cheering increased to a thunderous cascade. Tiny and plump, fierce and dignified in his gleaming cavalry boots, swagger-stick under his arm, Lord French of Ypres scurried to the centre of the Viceregal Stand a pace or two ahead of the tall and languidly strolling officers of his staff. For a moment, while he sternly acknowledged the delirious cheering of the crowd, his thick, pale moustache flared in the sunshine (surely that head, the Major was thinking, is too big for the rounded shoulders and dapper little body). Then, having greeted the representatives of the Government, he made ready to take the salute. Meanwhile the Major had turned and was forcing his way back through the crowd towards Jury's Hotel.

Already the leading contingents had turned the corner from the Castle Yard and were moving up Dame Street beneath the tossing, brilliant roof of flags and bunting. First came the Mounted Police, men with granite faces on su-perb, caracoling horses; as the Major made his way through the crowded entrance to Jury's a great cheer was sent up to welcome their arrival at the Viceregal Stand. The hotel foyer was deserted. Everybody was either on the street or at some vantage-point on one of the upper storeys. But as the Major, without impatience, was climbing the stairs to his own room, he almost collided with a gentleman coming down in great haste. He glanced at the Major and then cried: "Man, what a stroke of luck! I've been looking for you everywhere." It was Boy O'Neill, wild-eyed and in a great state of excitement.

"Edward told me you had a room with a view. You don't mind, do you? Can't see a blessed thing from the street. Left the ladies up on the landing above. Quick, we'll miss it all."

Mrs O'Neill and Viola, looking tired and rather cross, were standing near a window entirely blocked by a group of very fat and ecstatic ladies. They brightened up when they saw the Major.

The Major opened the door of his room and stood aside for the ladies. Boy O'Neill thrust them aside, however, sped across the room and threw the window up with a crash. The skirl of pipes filled the room, diminishing gradually as they passed on towards College Green.

"The Irish Guards," groaned O'Neill. "We missed the pipers." He craned out over the street. "Here come the demobbed lads."

While her father and mother gazed hungrily down at the passing troops and recited the names of regiments (the Royal Irish, the "Skins," the Royal Irish Rifles, the Connaught Rangers, the Leinster, the Munster

Fusiliers), Viola O'Neill, who had stationed herself at another window with the Major, kept turning to bestow smiles and lingering glances on him.

"Will there be tanks, Major?" she inquired, opening her eyes very wide.

"I expect so," replied the Major gloomily.

"I'm sure I shall be frightened if there are," Viola went on, running the tip of her tongue around her parted lips. "I mean, just the sight of them."

"Wait! Is it them?" barked O'Neill from outside the other window. "Is it them or is it not?"

With feigned interest Viola leaned out to see what her father was looking at. "I've no head for heights," she assured the Major. "I'm afraid I'll fall if I lean any farther." And her small hand slipped into the Major's large paw, gripping it tightly. Frozen with alarm, the Major stared down at the grinning, jauntily striding Munster Fusiliers. The child was flirting with him! And she was certainly no more than fifteen years old. Although today her hair had been released from its pigtails and hung in thick shining tresses, she looked if anything younger than she had on their previous meeting in the Palm Court of the Majestic. What if the O'Neills should suddenly look back into the room and see him holding hands with their daughter?

"It is!" roared O'Neill from outside. "It's them! It's the Dubs! I can see them."

The volume of cheering below in the street increased to a deafening roar as the Dublin Fusiliers swung into sight. Viola withdrew a little from the window, making a face at the noise, and the Major took the opportunity of relinquishing her hand. But under the pretext of looking at something in the street she changed her position so that her perfumed tresses brushed against his chin. A scent of warm skin rose from her bare neck. The Major stepped back hurriedly and busied himself with lighting his pipe. And not a moment too soon. The O'Neills, hoarse with cheering, had just decided to restore their heads to the room.

The parade dragged on for another hour—an eternity it seemed to the Major, who presently retired to sit in an armchair with a newspaper. When at last the O'Neills had been granted their first view of armoured cars and tanks (Viola had gasped with emotion at the sight of the monsters creeping along Dame Street and silently besought the Major for comfort with her lovely grey eyes) and the parade had come to an end, Boy stepped back satiated from the window and remarked cryptically: "That should give the blighters something to think about."

His face appeared less drawn and yellow than when the Major had seen him at the Majestic and his listless manner had been replaced by a disquieting nervous energy. He'd never felt better, he assured the Major. Found a new doctor who'd done him the world of good...indeed, he felt a new man. He wouldn't give a farthing for your Harley Street specialists. "I feel a new man," he repeated categorically. Saying this, he looked angrily round the room, as if expecting the Major to disagree with him.

The O'Neills were going to spend the afternoon and evening in Kingstown. There were two ships in Kingstown harbour, H.M.S. *Umpire* and H.M.S. *Parker*, which were to be illuminated that evening to supplement the bonfires and fireworks. It should be a splendid sight. Would the Major not care to come along? The Major, whose patriotic zest had lapsed once again into apathy, declined. He said vaguely that he had to go and visit an acquaintance. When the O'Neills had gone the Major had lunch and went for a stroll. The streets were still packed with rowdy, enthusiastic men and women of all classes, many of them still wearing rosettes or Union Jacks. But now (or so it seemed to the Major, who was out of sorts) their enthusiasm had already begun to wear an aimless air. Peace had been celebrated; now there was the future to think about. The pubs were doing a thriving business, full of shouting and good cheer. As he passed their open doors he kept hearing the same song: "Tipperary" and other songs from the first year of the war. To the Major they sounded incongruous and pathetic. Dublin was still living in the heroic past. But how many of these revellers had voted for Sinn Fein in the elections?

On Monday morning the Major read in the *Irish Times* that Peace Day had been a splendid success: "The section of demobbed soldiers and sailors revealed the spirit of camaraderie that prevails in their ranks and the democratic side of army life. Men with top-hats walked beside men in their working clothes. Spats moved in time with hobnailed boots." There was also an account of how an ex-Dublin-Fusilier had marched over the whole route from the Castle to St Stephen's Green on crutches. By the time he reached the Green his palms were bleeding from the friction. When asked why he did not fall out he replied: "No, I knew it was my last march and I wouldn't fall out while I had a breath left in my body."

Only towards evening had a rowdy element manifested itself. Young men carrying Sinn Fein flags and singing "The Soldier's Song" had gathered outside the Post Office in Sackville Street. There had been a few scuffles before the po-lice arrived to disperse them. Later in the evening a large crowd had threatened to throw a soldier into the Liffey at Ormond Quay. A police sergeant coming to his rescue had been shot at close range and was now lying gravely ill in hospital. But when one considered the magnificence of the occasion, the nobility of the marching troops, the enthusiasm of the cheering crowds, perhaps these incidents might represent only the tiniest flaw in the smooth and majestic edifice of Peace Day—a flaw that was scarcely visible to a man of broad vision.

The Major was now faced with the alternative of abandoning Angela and crossing to England or returning to Kilnalough to assume his heavy but nebulous responsibilities as her fiancé. Unable to make up his mind to do

the one thing he was equally unable to make up his mind to do the other. The result was that for the time being he remained irresolutely in Dublin.

One day, while on a tram returning from Kingstown where he had spent the afternoon looking at the yachts and sitting in tea-shops, he suddenly found himself in the middle of a disturbance. The tram had come to a halt at the end of Northumberland Road just short of the canal bridge. A dense crowd had formed and motor cars had stopped on each side of the bridge. All the passengers were on their feet trying to see what was going on. Impatient with the delay, the Major decided to walk and forced his way through the crowd as far as the bridge. Abruptly shots rang out from close at hand and the crowd convulsed, forcing him back against the parapet. He almost fell but somehow managed to cling to the brick-work and pull himself up. On the far side of the canal two men in trench coats sprinted away in the direction of the quays. A tall, strongly built man lumbered after them, his movements impeded by a sandwich-board that hung to his knees; in his right hand he carried a revolver. Behind the southern wall of the canal the Major glimpsed the khaki uniforms of British soldiers. There was a volley of rifle shots and the man in the sandwich-board was buffeted by an invisible wind. A few yards farther on he paused, raised his revolver and fired back across the canal at the soldiers; then he hastened on again. More rifle shots. Once more the big man was buffeted, then ran on clumsily a few yards. He was shouting something. His companions had vanished by now. Abruptly he collapsed inside the sandwich-board, subsided slowly to his knees and hung there, head lolling, arms trailing, still supported by the boards, like an abandoned puppet.

Slowly the crowd began to move again, stunned and cautious, releasing the Major. He moved forward a few steps until he could see what had stopped the traffic on the bridge. An old man—white moustache, grey face spattered with scarlet—lay on his back, eyes rolled up beneath the lids so that only the whites were visible. A gold watch, linked by a chain to the top buttonhole of his waistcoat, still lay in the palm of his right hand encircled by long ivory fingernails.

Shaken, the Major shoved his way through the crowd in the direction of Mount Street. The big man still hung like a rag doll strapped into the sandwich-board. The Major was close enough now to read in black letters HOLY MARY MOTHER OF GOD PRAY FOR US SINNERS! The sandwich-board was made not of wood but of iron; the metal, deeply scored by bullets, gleamed through the torn paper. The big man had been using it as a suit of armour.

The next day he read an account of the incident. The old man was an Englishman, of course, a retired army officer who worked in the Intelligence Department in Dublin Castle. He was a widower and lived near by in Northumberland Road. He had been coming home from his office after work when a man carrying a sandwich-board had stepped out of the crowd and asked him the time. And someone had heard the man say: “Ah then, your time has come!” and with that he had raised a revolver to the old man’s head and pulled the trigger. But the assassin had been unlucky. A party of British sol-diers had just finished searching a house beside the church on the corner and they had been ready for trouble. The man in the sandwich-board had died without giving his name. Who was he? Nobody knew. The unknown murderer had been carrying a sandwich-board with a religious message (the Major overheard someone in Jury’s say with a laugh) because it was thought that Englishmen, Protestants, would turn their eyes away from the name of Our Lady, and these days so many people were being stopped and searched for arms...

The Major read this newspaper account and the next day found one or two more. But although it was mentioned in passing once or twice, the murder of the old man had been classified and accepted. It was odd, he thought. An old man is gunned down in the street and within a couple of days this senseless act is both normal and inevitable. It was as if these newspaper articles were poultices placed on sudden inflammations of violence. In a day or two all the poison had been drawn out of them. They became random events of the year 1919, inevitable, without malice, part of history. The old man lying on the bridge with his watch in his hand was a part of history. And thus, the Major reflected—looking out of his window at the bustling traffic of Dame Street, at the gentlemen in bowler hats, at the fine ladies in their billowing dresses, at the flower and fruit sellers, at the ragged women with babies and barefoot children clinging to their skirts begging in the street below “For the Mercy of God”...“For the Holy Vargin!”...at the gleaming motor cars, at the friendly faces, at the jaunting—cars with their nodding horses and at all the other things which would not be recorded—a particle of the history of this year is formed. A raid on a barracks, the murder of a policeman on a lonely country road, an airship crossing the Atlantic, a speech by a man on a platform, or any of the other random acts, mostly violent, that one reads about every day: this was the history of the time. The rest was merely the “being alive” that every age has to do.

This thought must have displeased him, for he said to himself: “I’ll leave tonight and go back to London. And then perhaps I’ll go abroad and spend the winter in Italy.” The boat train left Westland Row at ten past seven. He would get into Euston at half past five tomorrow morning. “I have plenty of time. I’ll ring for someone to pack my bags.”

But at this moment there was a knock on the door. It was the chambermaid in her black uniform and white apron and cap. She had a telegram for him. It was from Edward to say that Angela had died the night before and would he return to Kilnalough as soon as possible.

Gone to the angels. The Major thought about her on the train back to Kilnalough. He thought about the tea-party the day he had arrived in Kilnalough a few weeks earlier; indeed, it was his only memory of her. He had no other. And somehow he could not help smiling sadly when he remembered her fierce nostalgia in the tropical gloom of the Palm Court.

And now Angela had gone to join the ancient pre-Raphaelite poets and the steady-eyed explorers who had shed their earthly envelopes (as the saying goes). She had gone to join the dead rowing blues (they were most probably among those blurred chaps on Edward's War Memorial) who had quaffed pre-war champagne out of her slippers. She had gone to the place where all the famous people go, and the obscure ones too for that matter.

"I'm dying," she had said to him, "of boredom," and even that remembered statement seemed to lack pathos or tragedy. It was almost as if one might expect to find "of boredom" written on her death certificate. "Well," he thought, "I don't mean to laugh at her, poor girl. She must have been ill even then." Indeed, it made him feel sad to think of her now, sitting there in that pseudo-tropical clearing in Kilnalough and dying "of boredom," if not of something that reminded her more painfully of the harshness of reality, of the transience of youth, and of her own mortality.

The Major did not arrive at the Majestic until after dark and it would not have surprised him to find nobody there to greet him. However, as he climbed the stone steps and dragged open the massive front door he saw that there was a glimmer of light in the foyer. The electric light appeared not to be functioning but an oil lamp was burning dimly on the reception desk and beside it, asleep on a wooden chair, was the old manservant, Murphy. He started violently as the Major touched his arm and gave a gasp of terror; it was true that there was something eerie about this vast shadowy cavern and the Major himself felt a shiver of apprehension as his eyes tried to probe beyond the circle of light into the darker shadows where the white figure of Venus flickered like a wraith. He bent an ear; Murphy was wheezing some information.

Edward had retired early on Dr Ryan's instructions, worn out. He would see the Major in the morning. The twins, Miss Faith and Miss Charity, had returned from their holidays earlier that same evening for their sister's funeral which would be held tomorrow at eleven. If the Major required anything to eat he would find sandwiches in the dining-room.

Murphy took the oil lamp and led the way to the dining-room without volunteering to carry the Major's suitcase. But the Major was by now an old hand at the Majestic, so he picked it up without a murmur and plunged down the corridor in the wake of the dancing lamp. Soon he was wearily masticating soda-bread sandwiches which contained some sort of fish; he supposed it to be salmon. There was no sound except for the creaking of the wind outside and an occasional flash of rain against the window-panes. Murphy had gone away with the oil lamp and the only illumination was provided by the two-branched silver candlesticks that flanked his plate of sandwiches.

A great melancholy stole over him. He sat there at the table in his mackintosh (which he had not bothered to remove) and thought of Angela and felt sorry for her, and he felt sorry for Edward too. And presently, thinking of the old man dead on the canal bridge, he felt sorry not only for the dead but for the mortal living too...it made so little difference. Having eaten, he drank a glass of beer and climbed the creaking, treacherous stairs to the room he had used before. It was exactly as he had left it. The sheets had not been removed (thank heaven!) and the bed had not been made. He undressed and crawled beneath a generous pile of damp blankets.

The sun shone brilliantly on the day of Angela's funeral. The Major woke very late and by the time he had gone downstairs to breakfast dressed in a dark suit and black tie for the sombre occasion Edward had already left for the church. So had the twins, apparently. There was no sign of them. Only Ripon was left, looking pale and wretched, unable to find anything to say. He looked relieved when the Major refused his offer of a lift to the church, saying that he would prefer to walk.

"Angela had leukaemia," Ripon told him in reply to his question. "We thought you knew."

"Well, no, actually, I didn't," replied the Major, sounding rather cross. How typical of the Spencers to leave him to find out for himself!

He entered the churchyard by a side gate of wrought iron which at some time in the distant past had been left open so long that it had rusted that way and was now immovable, embroidered by thick green threads of grass into the bank behind it. In earlier days it had borne an inscription in Gothic letters so ornate that one could hardly read them...The Lord is...My shepherd? Rust had entirely dislodged the rest of the scroll. "My defence," perhaps. Whatever it was it lay in dark flakes somewhere in the grass.

A little farther on he came to a pile of fresh, dark earth and it gave him a disagreeable shock when he realized that this was where Angela was to be interred. As he passed he was unable to resist a glance down into the neat oblong trench along the sides of which the white knuckles of roots showed like nuts in a slice of fruit-cake. Down there, in the course of a year or two, these slender white fingers would grow out again and wrap themselves round the wooden box imprisoning this unfortunate English lady (poor Angela, he was sure that her thoughts had always been returning like little lost dogs to such places as Epsom and Mayfair, Oxford and Cowes) for ever in Irish soil. He moved on now into the deep blue shadow cast by the tower of the church, a structure as modest as the headstones in the churchyard and made of the same grey, granitic stone quarried on the coast (Edward had once told him) ten or so miles away. The Roman Catholic chapel, as it

happened, was also made of this stone.

The Major slipped into a pew at the back and, lulled by the organ's soft piping and rumbling and creaking of pedals, fell into a pleasant and confused day dream about a hiking holiday he had taken before the war, remembering how he had lain on a hillside on a sunny day like this, the long grass combed flat by the wind. It was very peaceful here.

When he looked up at last he saw Edward. Although his face was stony and expressionless he must have been weeping a few moments earlier, for his normally bristling moustache had become sodden and was drooping towards his chin; a drop of water clinging to it caught a ray of sunlight as he passed and glittered like a diamond. With Edward were two slim girls in identical black dresses and black veils that scarcely dimmed their shining blonde curls. They stood there, tall and straight, one on each side of their father, their lovely faces sad and composed as they began to move up the aisle in step with Edward who had an arm over each of their shoulders and was lurching slightly, in the manner of a prize-fighter being helped from the ring. At the end of the aisle they neatly supported him into the front pew, even tilted him forward a little to pray, before kneeling themselves and bowing their shining heads.

The service took its course. The rector had begun to talk about Angela and was evidently having difficulty, not merely in marshalling the dead girl's qualities, but even in thinking of anything to say about her at all. A shaft of blood-stained sunlight crept from the dusty hassock on to the gleaming toe of the Major's shoe. The devoted sister, the rector was saying, of these two lovely children (and of...of this fine young man, he added as an afterthought). The Major's mind slipped away to the windblown hillside, with its scent of clover and wild thyme. The model of the Christian lady, gentle, firm and devoted, whom the Lord in His inscrutable wisdom...

"Ah," thought the Major, "inscrutable wisdom..." The grey-faced man lay on the pavement spattered with scarlet, a gold watch clutched in his fingers. Goodbye, Angela. He sighed and tried to struggle back to the windblown hillside. He fell asleep, though, before he could get there. He was woken again almost instantly by the crash of his hymn-book which had closed itself and fallen between his knees. The rector was saying: "When Duty called her she answered with firmness and devotion..."

Before the day of the funeral was over the Major had once more left Kilnalough. An hour or two after he had returned to the Majestic with the other mourners word arrived that his elderly aunt in London (whose health had been poor for some time) had taken a definite turn for the worse. Her doctor had decided that it was necessary to summon the Major, who happened to be her only surviving relative. He sought out Edward, who was wandering around the hotel in a sort of agonized daze, trying to avoid the old ladies who kept bounding out of the shadows to present their condolences. Edward squeezed his arm and said that he quite understood —which possibly meant quite the opposite, namely, that he took the Major's dying aunt to be a polite fiction. But there was nothing the Major could do about *that*: to have gone into de-tail would have made things worse than ever. Since he had missed the afternoon train Murphy was ordered to take him across country in the trap to Valebridge from where he might catch a later train which, with luck, might get him to Kingstown in time to catch the boat.

Edward raised his leonine head and squared his shoulders with an effort.

"Angela gave me this for you. A few days before she... you know..."

The Major glanced at the envelope and, although he had felt very little throughout this day of black ties, pale faces and subdued voices (only perhaps a vague dread, a muffled sadness), the sight of his name written in the familiar, meticulously neat handwriting abruptly squeezed his heart. And at last Angela was really dead.

"I'd better get a move on. I must say goodbye to Ripon and the twins."

The twins were in the writing-room being comforted by a pair of portly gentlemen in tweeds; they had clearly been reluctant to remove the gossamer-black veils which suited them so perfectly and now they sat on sofas, pale and brave, their eyes shining and their slender hands being patted by the rough, hairy paws of their escorts. The Major decided not to disturb them (after all, he had never set eyes on them before today) and instead, while Murphy waited outside the front door with the trap, searched from room to room for Ripon.

He was not in the Palm Court, nor in the dining-room (where one or two pale but hungry-looking mourners were gravely feeding on a cold collation), nor in the residents' lounge, nor in the ladies' lounge, the ballroom, the breakfast room, the coffee room or the gun room. He stood in the corridor, baffled, trying to think where Ripon might be. He ascended to the Imperial Bar, but Ripon was not there either. It was some time since the Major had been here; a new litter of kittens were romping on the floor, charming little ginger fellows. The previous litter had grown considerably in his absence and had abandoned the carpet to the new arrivals. Instead, they dozed on dusty chairs or picked their way among the bottles on the bar, their eyes blazing. The Major was still holding Angela's letter in his hand. He put it down on the bar and stooped to pick up one of the ginger kittens. It squirmed in his palm, mewing feebly, and dug its tiny claws into his fingers. With a sigh he dropped it and looked at his watch. He must hurry. Where on earth was Ripon? He decided, as a last resort, to try the billiard room.

There he found him, throwing a jack-knife from one end of the room to the other trying to make it stick in the oak panelling. His hand was raised to throw as the Major stepped across the threshold.

"Steady the Buffs!"

"Oh, it's you. I just thought I'd come down here for a while. All those morbid old ladies, you know."

"Just called to say goodbye. I've got to go back to England to see a relation who's been taken ill."

"Oh, I see," nodded Ripon, putting on his jacket and for some reason patting his pockets anxiously. "I don't blame you, really. It's awful here, isn't it? I'm thinking of trying to get out myself while the going's good before the bloody ship sinks, so to speak. Matter of fact I'm glad you came because I've been wanting a word with you."

For the second time in less than ten minutes the Major considered defending the innocence of his motives for leaving, but thought better of it.

"Well, I haven't got much time. In fact, I haven't got any time at all. You see, I missed the train from here and I've got to get myself over to Valebridge before, let me see..." He looked at his watch.

"You've heard the news, of course," stated Ripon, ignoring the Major's remarks. "It's all over town, I expect."

"Heard what news?" demanded the Major anxiously.

"About me and Máire Noonan. I'm sure that little bitch Sarah will have told you."

"Yes, I did hear something. But look here, Ripon, you mustn't go around calling girls bitches like that...I mean, really! Besides, she's a cripple, more or less, and if *you* had her disability..."

"I suppose you know Máire's a fish-eater...an R.C.?"

"Yes."

"So there's going to be an unholy row sooner or later. Or maybe I should say a *holy* row. And just at the moment it's not such a good time, you know, what with poor old Angela and so on...But old man Noonan has been putting on the pressure, d'you see, and something's got to be done." Ripon paused and jabbed the knife violently into the oak panelling. "Can you lend me a couple of fivers, by the way?"

"No."

"Just one fiver would be a help."

"No."

"It doesn't really matter, of course, if you're short."

"Why has Mr Noonan been putting on the pressure?"

"It's this R.C. business. He thinks that maybe I'm not going to...Well, what it all boils down to is that he wants me to make it public and the main thing is..."

"To tell your father?"

Ripon nodded gloomily.

"Well, I'm sure it will all turn out all right. After all, the Noonans are rather wealthy from what I hear. I don't see why Edward would have any real objection once he knows you're serious."

"It's this stupid religious business, Major. The point is, you see, that I've been trotting along to see the old priest for what they call 'instruction' (they're frightful sticklers for the rules). Not my idea, I can assure you. Old man Noonan insisted on it. It's a lot of rot, really. I mean, frankly it doesn't make an awful lot of difference to me where we're married, couldn't care less about that sort of thing. The snag is that Himself is going to get into a fearful wax when he hears about it...and to tell the truth, I don't quite know what to do." He paused, avoiding the Major's eye. "Fact is, I was rather hoping you might do something to help me...tip the wink to Himself and so forth."

"Oh really! That's out of the question, Ripon. Look here, I'm in a dreadful hurry at the moment and I simply can't afford to miss this train (this business with my aunt is perfectly genuine, I can assure you). If you want me to give you advice I'd be glad to help you in any way I can; in fact, I'll give you my card and you can put it all down in black and white."

Ripon took the Major's card and looked at it without optimism.

"If you spoke to Father he might not take it so hard, you know. If you pointed out that it's not the end of the world and so forth. I know he respects you. I'm afraid he won't listen if I tell him."

"I'm sorry, but it's out of the question," repeated the Major, becoming agitated. "It won't do at all if I miss this train, as I'm sure to do if I stand here talking any longer. And so, well, I just wanted to say goodbye...I'm sure everything will turn out all right in the end. Goodbye, Ripon."

And without looking back the Major hastened along the corridor, up the stairs three at a time, through the residents' lounge, took a short cut through the orangerie and emerged beside the statue of Queen Victoria where Murphy was waiting for him with the trap.

As they reached the last point of the drive that afforded a view of the building the Major looked back at the grey, battlemented mass that stood there like a fortress among the trees.

"Stop, Murphy!" he cried suddenly. He had just remembered: he had left Angela's letter in the Imperial Bar!

The old manservant dragged on the reins and turned slowly to look back at the Major, his discoloured teeth exposed in a ghastly rictus. Was it the effort of reining in the pony that made him look like that or was he laughing hideously? The Major gazed fascinated at the old man's fleshless skull and sunken eyes.

"Never mind. Drive on or we'll miss the train." And he thought: "I'll get Edward to send it on to me. At this stage it can't contain anything very urgent, after all."

* * *

IN PRAISE OF BOXING

A man's last line of defence is his fists. There is no sport, not even cricket, which is more essentially English than boxing. Wilde is a national hero because he has shown that in the great sport which is ours, and now is the property of the whole world, we can still produce a champion when it comes to a fight. There is no sport in the world which demands cleaner living. There is no more natural sport. Low cunning will not help him, but a quick, clear brain, a hard body, and perfect training will carry a man a long way.

* * *

The Major now found himself sitting beside his aunt's sick-bed in London and not in the best of tempers. He had very quickly reached the conclusion that his aunt was less sick than he had been led to believe, which irritated him and caused him to suspect a conspiracy between this lonely old lady and her doctor (it was the doctor who had sent the telegram which summoned him). And although within a few months his aunt vindicated herself by dying, the Major was never quite able to discard the faint irritation he had felt at being greeted, as he raced up a beautifully polished staircase (everything looked so clean after the Majestic) beneath sombre, heavily varnished portraits of distant dead relations, and burst into her bedroom, by a wan smile rather than a death-rattle. Meanwhile he sat beside her bed with her loose-skinned, freckled hand in his and murmured rather testily: "Of *course* you'll get better...You're only imagining things." But even while consoling his aunt his thoughts would very often revert to Edward. "If I'd stayed a little longer," he kept thinking, "I might have been able to cushion the shock and make him see reason about Ripon and his lady-friend. After all, it can't be as serious as all that." Nevertheless he knew instinctively that the possibilities of mutual

incomprehension between Edward and Ripon would be prodigious, and he continued to ruminate on them as he held a glass of verbena tea to his aunt's faintly moaning lips and commanded her brusquely to take a sip. To tell the truth, he felt rather like a man who has walked away from a house drenched in petrol leaving a naked candle burning on the table.

Here he was in London and nobody seemed to be dying. What was he doing here anyway? The doctor appeared to be avoiding him these days and when they did meet he wore an apologetic air, as if to say that it really wasn't his fault. But at last the day came when the doctor, with a new confidence, informed him that his aunt had had a serious haemorrhage during the night. And even his aunt, though pale as paper, looked gratified. This news upset the Major, because he was fond of his aunt and really did not want her to die, however much he might want her to stop being a nuisance. However, in spite of the haemorrhage, his aunt still showed no sign of passing on to "a better life" (as she unhopefully referred to it herself when, for want of another topic of interest to both of them, she embarked, as she frequently did, on conversations beginning: "All this will be yours, Brendan...").

The news from Ireland was dull and dispiriting: an occasional attack on a lonely policeman or a raid for arms on some half-baked barracks. If one was not actually living in Ireland (as the lucky Major no longer was) how could one possibly take an interest when, for instance, at the same time Negroes and white men were fighting it out in the streets of Chicago? Now *that* gripped the Major's imagination much more forcibly. Unlike the Irish troubles one knew instantly which side everyone was on. In the Chicago race-riots people were using their skins like uniforms. And there were none of the devious tactics employed by the Shinners, the pettifogging ambushes and assassinations. In Chicago the violence was naked, a direct expression of feeling, not of some remote and dubious patriotic heritage. White men dragged Negroes off streetcars; Negroes fired rifles from housetops and alleyways; an automobile full of Negroes raced through the streets of a white district with its occupants promiscuously firing rifles. And Chicago was only a fragment of the competition that Ireland had to face. What about the dire behaviour of the Bolshevists? The gruesome murders, the rapes, the humiliations of respectable ladies and gentlemen? In late 1919 hardly a day went by without an eye-witness account of such horrors being confided to the press by some returned traveller who had managed to escape with his skin. And India: the North-West Frontier...Amritsar? No wonder that by the time the Major's eye had reached the news from Ireland his palate had been sated with brighter, bloodier meat. Usually he turned to the cricket to see whether Hobbs had made another century. Presently the cricket season came to an end. A rainy, discouraging autumn took its place. Soon it would be Christmas.

One day the Major received a telegram. To his surprise it was signed SARAH. It said: DON'T READ LETTER RETURN UNOPENED. The Major had not yet received any letter and waited with impatience for it to arrive. Next morning he was holding it in one hand and tapping it against the fingertips of the other. After a brief debate with himself he opened it.

She had no reason for sending him a letter (she wrote) and he didn't have to read it if he didn't want to. But she was in bed again with "an unmentionable illness" and bored to tears, literally ("I sometimes burst into tears for no reason at all") and, besides, her face was so covered in spots that she looked "like a leopard" and she had become so ugly that little children fled wailing if they saw her at the window and nobody ever came to see her these days and she had no friends now that poor Angela had died and (that reminded her) why had he not come over to say hello to her on the day of Angela's funeral...after all, she (Sarah) didn't bite, but then she supposed that he was too high and mighty to be seen talking to the likes of her and he probably, anyway, couldn't read her writing because she was scribbling away in bed, her fingers "half frozen off" and surrounded by stone hot-water jars against which she kept cracking her "poor toes" and which were practically freezing anyway...and besides, besides, she was positively bored to distraction with everything and there was simply nothing to do in Kilnalough, nothing at all, and she would certainly run away if she could (which, of course, she couldn't, being a "poor, miserable cripple" into the bargain... and full of self-pity, he would surely be thinking)...

But enough of that, about herself there was nothing of interest to say. The Major must be wanting to hear what was happening in Kilnalough and at the Majestic and the answer to that was...ructions!!! Edward Spencer challenging Father O'Meara (practically) to a duel for improper association with Ripon. Old Mr Noonan threatening to horsewhip the young pup (Ripon, that was) if he didn't stop playing fast and loose with Máire (did the Major remember the fat pudding of a girl they had met one day in the street?) and show whether he was a gentleman or what he was, anyway, begod...And as to what *that* might mean the Major's guess was as good as hers...only it wouldn't surprise anyone to learn that the above-mentioned fat pudding was pregnant with triplets by the young pup. And to make matters worse Fr O'Meara was threatening to sue Edward for something the twins had done to him, she didn't quite know *what* but she'd try and find out and let him know. Anyway, there was surely worse to come.

However, she was pretty certain that such provincial matters would hardly interest him now that he was back in the big city...Was it true that in London even the horses wore leather shoes? But she was only teasing him, of course. The English (that was to say, "the enemy") were so serious one could never risk making a joke in case they believed you.

Had the Major heard the very latest, God forgive her (in fact, God forgive everybody), that had been happening right under her nose all this while...which was that one of her father's clerks, a red-faced lad up from the country with a smathering of the "mattermathics" had dared, had had the temerity, had made so bold-faced as to get up his nerve to, in spite of her spots (which must show what strong stomachs country people had), actually *fall in love with her*! ! ! Without so much as a by-your-leave! He, the Major, would undoubtedly be as amazed as she was that even a country lad who only knew about cows (and himself smelled like a farmyard) could have his wits so deranged as to consider marrying a "total cripple" like herself.

Himself: "Will ye walk out with me, Miss Devlin?"

Me: "How can I, you peasant oaf, with no legs?" And now every time she went out of the house she would find her "rural swain" touching his forelock and blushing like a ripe tomato and the whole thing was positively sickening and disgusting. There surely must be something wrong with someone (apart altogether from the things which immediately greeted the eye and the nose) who would marry someone like her sooner than one of the millions of girls who could churn his butter and wash his clothes and thump his dough and have a brat a year like a pullet laying eggs from dawn to dusk without so much as batting an eyelid. And what did the Major think of such a thing anyway? Wasn't she right to treat the whole thing as nonsense? But the worst was yet to come.

One could hardly believe it, but the "rural swain" had had the temerity to approach her father with his "bovine proposal" and had even inquired if there might not be a little bit of a dowry now to sweeten the bargain, a couple of heifers and a few quid, perhaps, or a brace of pigs and a few auld hens and then maybe later on a wee share in the bank (which he seemed to think was something like a farm for growing money) and so on and so forth, with lots of blushes and his breeches hanging off of him like potato sacks on a scarecrow! And the very worst was yet to come!

Incredible though it might seem, her father, instead of sneering at the young bog-trotter's pretensions to his fair daughter's hand, boxing his ears and sending him back to scratching in his ledgers or whatever he did (stoking the boiler for all she knew), had said that, by Jove, in such circumstances one did well to treat all proposals with serious consideration and though, of course, it would never occur to "me or your mother" to influence her in any way, it nevertheless seemed unwise to send likely lads packing, up from the country or not (after all, they could be groomed and citified to cope with Kilnalough's undemanding standards), before one had given them a fair run for their money! The Major would hardly believe it, but there was even worse to come!

The "bovine suitor," greatly encouraged by her father's attitude, had now taken to lurking beside the gate whenever she went outside, greeting her with familiar winks, and had even approached her near enough to suggest that she should play him "a bit of a tune" on her piano and even, no doubt considering the conquest effected, had placed a hand like a gelatine lobster on her "fair shrinking shoulder," murmuring that she should accord him "a hug." Naturally, he had received a tongue-lashing for his trouble. Yet he had stood there grinning and red-faced (the blush, she realized, was permanent), quite unabashed. What did the Major make of her predicament? Did he not agree that it would be better to accept the rigours of spinsterhood and penury ("your mother and I won't always be here to look after you, you know") rather than submit to such a grisly fate? Indeed, her only support in the matter had come from a totally unsuspected source, namely the incredibly ancient and insufferable Dr Ryan whom she had always thought of as her "arch-enemy." He had told her father flatly that he would as soon see her marry a gorilla in the Dublin Zoo as the above-mentioned peasant Lothario and that if he so much as heard mention of the matter again he would see to it that all his patients in Kilnalough transferred their business to some other bank. So for the moment there was an armistice. But for how long? The more he thought about it the more her father wanted to marry her off. So no wonder that she had been overtaken by her "unmentionable illness." Perhaps, like poor Angela, she would just wilt away and probably no one would care. The Major, she was certain, wouldn't care in the least.

And who knew? Perhaps her parents were right. Perhaps there was no real difference between one man and another. After all (she sometimes found herself thinking, sinful though such thoughts were), after all, are we so very different from animals? And animals made less fuss about such matters.

By the way, she had forgotten to mention one curious thing about the "rural swain" (whose name was Mulcahy, incidentally): in his lapel he wore a plain gold ring. She had asked him what it meant. "*An Fáinne*," he had replied: Oh, she had eyes in her head, she had told him impatiently. But what was it *for*, that was what she wanted to know? Oh, so she "had the Irish"? Just a little, she had admitted, not wanting to encourage his respect. Well, it was like a circle for Irish-speaking people, he had explained, so that they might recognize each other by the ring and talk to each other in Irish rather than in the tongue of the foreigner. They had a retreat, it appeared: a number of young men and women anxious to perfect themselves in the ancestral language of Ireland, all off in a cottage in the depths of the country somewhere chattering away in Irish from morn till night. Had the Major ever heard of such a wonderful idea? She had to admit that that was one point in Mulcahy's favour (admittedly, the only one). He had even asked *her* to join the circle (though no doubt his motives were impure). So the "rural swain," though he did not do at all, though he was impossible, at least had gained a meagre point.

A few days later she had met a young Englishman, an officer from the Curragh camp staying with his uncle for a few days, and she had told him about this idea of people speaking Irish to each other. "How bizarre!" he

had exclaimed. “How delightful! How original!” and he had told her about a club he had joined at Oxford which specialized in trying to make contact with poltergeists in haunted houses.

Ah, but the Major wouldn’t be interested in all this dull tattle from the provinces since he was in London at the very centre of things, at the very centre of the Empire, of “Life” even! She had abused his good nature by rambling on so long about herself and her own petty problems. He must think of her as she herself thought of the bovine aspirant for her affections, Mulcahy. And besides, besides, her fingers were now frozen to the point where they were practically “dropping off,” the hot-water bottles were lumps of ice on every side of her, her ink-well too was freezing over and her room was so cold that with every breath the paper she was writing on would disappear in a cloud of steam. The weather was quite appalling, cold and damp beyond belief, and the days so dark that even at midday one had to turn up the gas mantle in order to read a book or do some sewing. What misery, the Major must be thinking, to be an Irishwoman, to be living in Ireland, to live all of one’s life in Ireland beneath the steady rain and the despair of winter and the boredom, the boredom! But no, she was *glad* she was Irish and he could think what he liked! She thought of him, however, with affection and remained truly his.

Having read this, the Major stood up and then sat down again. He turned over the thick, crinkly sheaf of writing-paper. The coffee pot had grown cold on the breakfast table. Well, he thought, what a remarkable letter...I must answer it immediately.

And so he sat down, ignoring his aunt’s faint cries from upstairs, and wrote a long and slightly delirious reply as if he too were in a fever, gripped in the claws of boredom, passionate and intense, surrounded by icy hot-water bottles. He said in substance that even with spots (and he couldn’t believe that they were as bad as she claimed) nobody but herself could ever for a moment consider her ugly. That it was, alas, only too natural that the moth should be attracted by the flame, that the “rural swain” (not to mention other young men) should become besotted with her charms; nevertheless, he agreed with Dr Ryan (the “senile old codger,” as Ripon called him) that, splendid fellow though Mulcahy no doubt was, it would be a shame to waste her on someone so little able to appreciate her culture, refinement and intelligence. Had she no relation in London whom she could stay with for a while with a view to stimulating “une heureuse rencontre,” as the Frenchies put it, with a young man worthy of her? If not then she must certainly come and stay with him, duly chaperoned, of course. He would be only too glad to do everything in his power to rescue this “cultured” pearl from the Irish swine.

In the meantime she must write and tell him everything that was going on at the Majestic. And she must write immediately. He was on tenterhooks. The thin, starving rats of curiosity were nibbling at his bones. As for London, though it was indeed the centre of the Empire it was no more the centre of “Life” than, say, Chicago, Amritsar, or Timbuctoo—“Life” being everywhere equal and coeval, though during the winter in Kilnalough one might be excused for thinking that “Life’s” fires were banked up if not actually burning low—certainly, if one happened to be in bed with an unmentionable illness.

With that, he hastily sealed the letter with dry lips and posted it. Then he sat down with impatience to await the reply. But the days passed and no reply came.

* * *

> Dispatches from Fiume this morning state that Gabriele D’Annunzio’s expedition has succeeded beyond the most sanguine expectations of those who took part in it. All along his march the poet was joined by military contingents which broke away from their camps. He summoned the Allied Commanders and troops to withdraw...The Italian commander, General Pittaluga, immediately tried to stop the advance, but in vain. He sent out troops to meet those of D’Annunzio and to order them to stop outside the town, but his own men immediately fraternized with those of D’Annunzio, and embraced one another. The general twice sent out nineteen armoured cars with machine-guns, but they also immediately went over to D’Annunzio. A dramatic scene then followed. General Pittaluga, with his last detachment, went to D’Annunzio at the point where he was entering the town. He halted a few paces from the advancing column, and his own soldiers remained a few paces behind. D’Annunzio ordered his car to stop and jumped out. The troops on both sides stood at the halt, impassive and silent.
>
> *An Animated Conversation*
>
> There were a few minutes of animated conversation between the general and the poet. General Pittaluga saluted D’Annunzio and then said to him: “This is the way to ruin Italy.” The poet replied instantly: “You will ruin Italy if you oppose destiny by an infamous policy.”
>
> The general asked what were the poet’s intentions. The reply was: “Not one shot shall be fired by my men if their passage is free.”
>
> The general retorted: “I have strict orders and must prevent an act which may have incalculable consequences for my country.”

The poet replied: “I understand your words, General. You will order your men to fire on my soldiers, their brothers. But before you do so, order them to fire on me. Here I am. Let them first fire on me.”

Saying this he moved towards the soldiers, exposing his breast adorned with the medal of military honour. There was a movement among the troops, who approached the poet and cheered him. The general saw that his opposition was useless. He walked up to the poet and complimented him. The soldiers on both sides immediately cheered the poet and the general, and without further orders they crossed the road which divides Fiume from the suburbs and entered the town. General Pittaluga withdrew alone and the soldiers opened a way for him.

* * *

Mr Noonan, though a miller by profession, was an admirer of the military life and liked to wear clothes that gave him a soldierly air. He arrived at the Majestic wearing his most severe garb, a suit of khaki material garnished with black epaulettes. He unwisely parted company with his chauffeur at the gates of the Majestic (he had never visited the place before) and started to walk up the drive. He had been delayed on some business matter and Edward, who had long since ceased to expect him, had changed into his gardening clothes and was digging a flower-bed, thinking that some exercise might benefit his liver. Since he had never met Mr Noonan, he assumed that this was merely a somewhat elderly and irascible telegraph boy and told him to go on up to the house. Mr Noonan, believing he had just had an encounter with a particularly insolent gardener, did so but with bad grace. Pausing for a moment to acknowledge the statue of Queen Victoria, he then proceeded to climb the steps and be swallowed up by the front door of the Majestic, in whose various tracts and organs he wandered, increasingly furious, while Edward dug peacefully in the garden and wondered whether he would lose face (and establish Ripon’s guilt) by going to pay a visit on Mr Noonan at his home.

Edward and Mr Noonan probably had more in common than they ever had a chance to realize. Neither, at this stage, was the least enthusiastic about a union of their respective children. Mr Noonan, looking round the mouldering caverns of the Majestic, no doubt saw immediately that only a massive transfusion of money could keep the place habitable for a few years longer; in a material sense it was a poor match for the daughter of Noonan’s Flour. As for the quality which Mr Noonan had once found faintly appetizing when he considered the prospect of having Ripon Spencer for a son-in-law, the quality of “breeding” (and with it automatic entry into the ruling class in Ireland from which Mr Noonan, in spite of his wealth and influence in business matters, was virtu-ally excluded), he had now become extremely dubious as to whether Ripon possessed it in adequate quantities. Besides, by the autumn of 1919 it had become clear to everyone in Ireland with the possible exception of the Unionists themselves that the Unionist cause had fallen into a decline. Add to that Ripon’s taint of Protestantism (which in Mr Noonan’s view no amount of “instruction” could scrub off) and the lad was a truly unsavoury prospect.

Edward’s feelings were virtually a mirror-image of Mr Noonan’s. He had a profound lack of interest in money, never having been sufficiently short of it, and was positively chilled by the idea that his daughter-in-law (buxom and rosy-cheeked) should be represented on packets of flour available to the grubby fingers of the populace for a penny or two. He was by no means anxious to dissolve the “breeding” of the Spencers in a solution of Irish “bog Catholicism” (a daughter of Cardinal Newman might have been another matter). In these troubled times one clearly had to close the ranks, not open them...or so he thought as he set off to wander around the corridors of the Majestic in search of the “dratted” elderly telegraph boy (he supposed it *was* a telegraph boy). The two men failed to meet immediately, however, since Mr Noonan, tired of waiting, had struck off towards the west wing, Edward towards the east.

Little by little, as they moved back towards each other, Edward’s thoughts turned to the main and unbridgeable chasm, the Roman Catholicism of the Noonans: the unhealthy smell of incense, the stupefying and bizarre dogmatic precepts, the enormous families generated by ignorance and a doctrine of “the more souls the better” (no matter whether their corporeal envelopes went barefoot or not), the absurd squadron of saints buzzing overhead like chaps in the Flying Corps supposedly ever ready to lend a hand to the blokes on the ground (and each with his own speciality), the Pope with all his unhealthy finery, the services in a gibberish of Latin that no one understood, least of all the ignorant, narrow-minded and hypocritical priests. Well, such thoughts do not actually have to occur by a process of thinking; they run in the blood of the Protestant Irish.

At this point he found himself at the foot of the staircase leading to the servants’ quarters and remembered that the maids had been complaining about a supposed colony of rats. There was no shortage of them in the cellars, of course, but who ever heard of rats in the upper storeys? The whole thing was plainly nonsense; all the same, since he was there on the spot he might as well have a look round.

The inspection did not take long and it came as no surprise to him that no rodent crossed his path. He peered with distaste into the cramped little rooms with their sloping ceilings. They had a curious and alien smell which he could not quite identify; perhaps it came from a lingering of cheap perfume on Sunday clothes (seeing the maids out of uniform in Kilnalough, he very often failed to recognize them and stared in surprise if they acknowledged him). Wherever it came from, he associated it with the distressingly vulgar holy pictures on the wall, with the chocolate-coloured rosary beads on the table, with the crucifix above the bed.

“Education is what these people need. And they think they’re fit to govern a country!”

Satisfied that the rats were imaginary, Edward resumed his languid search for the telegraph boy.

Mr Noonan had just had a curious experience. He had met a maidservant hurrying down a corridor carrying a tray of teacups and toasted scones together with a large and (it must be admitted) desirable seed-cake. He had beckoned her, summoned her to his side. “Come here to me now,” he had said to her. But, to his surprise, hardly had the girl seen him when she turned and fled back the way she had come. Not knowing what a business it was to get afternoon tea at the Majestic, the bribes and cajolery that had to be administered, the deadly feuds that could be sponsored by one guest spotting another settling down to a clandestine sup of tea and bite of toast in a remote corner, Mr Noonan was astonished at this behaviour.

“Where is the master?” he called after her. But she had scurried away and he was left listening to the fading clatter of her shoes on the tiles. A little later, however, he realized that there was a person following him, though very slowly, along the corridor. It turned out to be an old lady, a gentlewoman to judge by her clothing, moving forward with two sticks which she planted firmly in front of her one after the other in the manner of an Alpine guide. He halted and allowed her to catch up, her eyes on the ground, her breathing stertorous.

“Where is Mr Spencer?” he demanded.

The lady lifted her watery eyes and surveyed him; then she raised one of her sticks in a trembling, arthritic hand. The brass ferrule that tipped it performed a wavering figure-eight a little above his head. He took her to be indicating that his way led upwards.

He was not a young man himself. His chest had been giving him trouble. His blood-pressure was too high. He’d started with nothing, d’ye see, and done it all himself. Self-raising, like his own flour, was what they said in Kilnalough.

“Now what I’d better be doing is...”

He was alone once more and, one way or another, had climbed to the floor above. The only reason he knew this for certain was that he happened to be standing at a surprisingly clean window looking down on the drive and, incidentally, on Edward’s Daimler. It was raining very hard—so hard that a mist of spray was rising off the roof and bonnet of the car. Where was he? When had it started raining? He shouldn’t let himself get in a rage because these days there was always a thick mist, bloody and opaque, waiting to roll in and blot out the landmarks. Now wait, the motor car had been left in front of the building, he remembered seeing it. Well, the great staircase with the chandelier was in the front of the building too...so that meant that he was on or beside the staircase.

He was squeezed by a really breathtaking grip of anger when, on looking round, he found that this was not so. There was no staircase in sight. It was unfair and spiteful—a real British trick, the kind of murthering, hypocritical...Mother of God! he would like to have smashed a window, he had even raised the heavy ash handle of his furled umbrella to shatter the glass. He was restrained, though, by the sudden thought that the Englishman might consider it bad form. Besides, the window was already broken...that is, had obviously been broken on some other occasion, since it lacked its pane entirely. He could not have done it himself. There were no jagged edges. That was why it looked so clean. The rain, moreover, was pattering on the window sill and had darkened the faded crimson carpet (strewn with tiny three-pronged crowns) in the shape of a half-moon.

Having regrouped his forces, Mr Noonan set out along a carpeted corridor (while Edward continued to search disconsolately for him on the floor below), peering through the open doors of the many rooms he passed—nobody made any attempt to close doors here, it appeared—at double beds, enormous and sinful, without a trace of religion, at wash-basins and towels starched like paper and grey with dust. And this was what his only daughter was supposed to be marrying into!

In one room he came upon a vast pile of stone hot-water bottles, maybe two or three hundred of them. In another a makeshift washing-line had been stretched and forgotten, the clothing on it dry and riddled with moth-holes. In yet another he heard voices. He stopped and listened...but no, he had been mistaken (Edward at this moment was peering into the room directly below). At the next door, however, he definitely heard voices, so he entered with some confidence. He found himself, not in a bedroom but on a gallery that ran round beneath the ceiling of a large book-lined room. The voices were coming from below. He peered over the railing (as Edward, moving away from him once more, started towards the west wing).

Below, two identical girls were sitting on a studded sofa with books in their hands. Opposite them, in an armchair but sitting very straight, was a small elderly lady wearing a lace cap. Her milky eyes were directed towards the girls, while her hands, constantly moving and apparently disconnected from the rest of her body, knitted away tirelessly in her lap.

“Are you sitting up straight, Charity?”

“Yes, Granny.”

“Faith?”

“Yes, Granny.”

The two golden heads turned towards each other with their tongues out.

“A lady never slouches in her chair as if she had no backbone.”

“No, Granny.”

Faith let herself sink back with her mouth open, miming inertia, while Charity shook with silent laughter.

“Sit still!”

“We *are* bally well sitting still.”

“Don’t answer back! You’ll be kept here all afternoon unless you behave. Charity, are your knees together?”

“Yes, Granny.”

Charity pulled her skirt up over her knees and threw one leg over the arm of the sofa, exposing pink thighs.

“I’m sitting up straight, Granny,” she said, and snatching a pencil from Faith’s hand began to puff on it as if it were a cigarette-holder. While flicking the ash she happened to lift her eyes and saw Mr Noonan.

“Good girl,” said the old lady.

The twins stared up at Mr Noonan and he stared down at the twins. At length Charity said: “There’s an old man with an umbrella in the room, Granny.”

“An old man? What does he want?”

“What d’you want?” demanded Faith firmly.

“Where is Mr Spencer? I won’t stand for it,” stuttered Mr Noonan furiously. “I’m looking for...I shall speak to my solicitor!”

“What is he doing up near the ceiling?” the old lady wanted to know.

“We’re in the library, Granny. There’s a sort of balcony...”

“Well, whoever you are, I’m sure you won’t find your solicitor up there. Show him to the door, Faith. You stay here, Charity, it doesn’t take both of you.”

Faith was already half-way up the spiral iron staircase to the gallery. Without a word she grasped Mr Noonan by the sleeve and towed him back the way he had come, down a dark flight of stairs, along a corridor, through a deserted cocktail bar, into the lobby and up to the front door which, with an immense effort, she dragged open.

“Peeping Tom!” she hissed and, placing a hand on his back, gave him a violent shove which propelled him out into the rain at a reluctant gallop.

A few moments later Edward, looking out of a window without a pane on the first floor and thinking that all this rain would give his Daimler a good wash, noticed the elderly telegraph boy hurrying away down the drive. The fellow halted for a moment and shook his umbrella angrily at the Majestic.

“Good heavens!” murmured Edward. “I don’t suppose that could have been old what’s-his-name, by any chance...”

* * *

THE HORRORS OF BOLSHEVISM

Irish Ladies’ Terrible Experiences

Reuter’s representative has just had an interview with two Irish girls, the Misses May and Eileen Healy, who have just reached London, having escaped from Kieff with nothing but the clothes—thin linen dresses—they were wearing.

They tell a terrible story of the Bolshevist outrage, of which they were personal witnesses. They said that the mental strain was awful and one, Miss Eileen Healy, has lost 3 st. in weight.

“In a side building, a sort of garage, I saw a wall covered with blood and brains. In the middle was cut a channel or drain, full of congealed blood, and just outside in the garden, one hundred and twenty-seven nude, mutilated corpses, including those of some women, who had been flung into a hole...

“Ten Bolshevists occupied rooms next mine. There was a beautiful drawing-room filled with valuable furniture. There, night after night, they carried on drunken orgies of an unspeakable character with women whom they brought from the town, and I lay on my bed with the door barricaded until from sheer exhaustion I went to sleep...

“The terrorism of the Reds is really much worse than anything I have read of, and to those in this country who believe the story is exaggerated I would only say go out and see for yourselves.”

* * *

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF TRIUMPH

Marshal Foch’s Analysis

In conversation with a representative of the *Echo de Paris* Marshal Foch said that he had won the war by avoiding unnecessary emotions and conserving all his strength so as to devote himself whole-heartedly to his task. “War requires an ingenious mind, always alert, and one day the reward of victory comes. Don’t talk to me about glory, beauty, enthusiasm. They are verbal manifestations. Nothing exists except facts and facts alone are of any use. A useful fact, and one that satisfied me, was the signing of the armistice.”

In conclusion Marshal Foch said: “Without trying to drag in miracles just because clear vision is vouchsafed to a man, because afterwards it turns out that this clear vision has determined movements fraught with enormous consequences in a formidable war, I still hold that this clear vision comes from a Providential force, in the hands of which one is an instrument, and that the victorious decision emanates from above, by the higher and Divine will.”

* * *

Nineteen-twenty. One, two, three weeks of January—grey, cold weather, fog in the streets, dirty snow underfoot—elapsed before the Major finally found another letter from Sarah propped against the toast-rack on the breakfast table.

“Dear Major,” she wrote, “it was wrong of you to read that letter when I told you not to. I was ill when I wrote it and had a fever, as I’m sure I said. You needn’t expect me to apologize, however, since I took the trouble of warning you not to read it. It’s your own fault if you came across something that didn’t please you. About Mr Mulcahy, I regret very much making fun of him as he’s a decent enough sort of person and I exaggerated a great deal. As for being rescued from the Irish swine, as you remark, I can assure you that there’s really no need for that as they and I agree very well (perhaps because I’m one of the same swine myself). Also, as regards London, I’m perfectly content where I am. Nevertheless, I must thank you for your offer, because, though unsuitable, I’m sure it was kindly meant.”

“Ah,” thought the Major, chastened, “she’s angry with me and no doubt thinks that I’m contemptuous of Kilnalough. Perhaps my letter was tactless.” And he hurriedly wrote to apologize, pleading with her to forgive his tactlessness. Would she not satisfy his curiosity anyway? He was devoured with curiosity to know how the affair between Máire and Ripon had come out? And what was this thing that the twins had done to Fr O’Meara? And how was Edward bearing up under the strain?

All *she* knew (Sarah wrote back) was that Ripon and Máire were living in Rathmines with “a little one” on the way. Had he run away in the middle of the night with his fiancée? Had he been thrown out of his father’s house without a penny? Nobody knew for sure, but several stories were circulating in Kilnalough. According to the one she believed (or liked to believe, anyway) Ripon had half run away and half been ejected. What had happened (so this story went) was that Edward had given him a sum of money, driven him to the railway station and put him on the train for Dublin with strict orders to stay there and get up to no mischief until he, Edward, had settled the affair in Kilnalough. This done, he had arranged to meet Mr Noonan at the Majestic to talk things over. Meanwhile Ripon had only allowed the train to carry him to the next station up the line. There, after a long argument, he had finally succeeded in extracting a refund from the station-master on the rest of his ticket to Dublin. Then he had returned with all speed to Kilnalough, climbed the Noonan’s garden wall causing poor Máire to faint (she thought he was a tinker), revived her, informed her she was liberated (she had been “confined to barracks” by her military-minded father), helped her to pack a suitcase, bribed a man he saw standing at the gate whom he supposed was one of Noonan’s servants (but who was merely a bystander) and finally fled with her to the station while her father was still at the Majestic. By all accounts (or rather, by this particular account) the Kilnalough station-master came close to having a heart attack when young Ripon, whom he had only just seen go off on the last train to Dublin, appeared in time for the next one and went off on that one too, accompanied by a heavily veiled lady whose ample proportions and pink ankles suggested that it might not be impossible that this was “a certain person,” he’d say no more; as he was handing this veiled lady up into the carriage he had caught “a whiff of something not unlike chloroform...but, mind you, I’m not saying it was nor it wasn’t though, begod, it was as like as the divil!” Well, that was a story the Major could believe if he liked, the English (or “the enemy,” as she preferred to think of them) being so literal, the Major in particular being as literal as a lump of dough, she had no doubt that he’d believe it all.

As for the attack of the twins on Fr O’Meara, here was another story that the Major could try out on his digestion. The brave and worthy Fr O’Meara had taken it into his head one day to pay a visit on Ripon whom he had been grooming spiritually (the Major being a “beastly Prod” would fail to see the need for this, she was sure) for the marriage he contemplated with the miller’s daughter. He had cycled up the drive past two identical girls of such radiant countenance that he had at first mistaken them for “angels from heaven” (he was later said to have explained, while still in a state of shock). However, when one of them made a disagreeable remark he quickly perceived his mistake and pedalled onwards out of earshot disturbed, in particular that a young girl should know such words, in general at God’s habit, frequently observable here below, of mixing the fair with the foul, the good with the evil, and so on.

Before reaching the front door he had come upon Ripon in the orangerie, apparently in the act of upbraiding a flustered girl in maid’s uniform who had no doubt neglected some household chore (though she, Sarah, had her own opinion of what the rogue was doing). Ripon had appeared startled and suggested a “stroll.” Fr O’Meara, who envisaged a reflective promenade discussing extra-terrestrial matters, agreed immediately and they set off, Ripon heading at a great pace towards the bushes and looking round somewhat furtively the while. Fr O’Meara had trouble keeping up with him, but after the first hundred yards or so the pace slackened and Ripon asked him a few distrait questions about the catechism. Then somewhat abruptly he said he’d have to be going and marched off without even conducting his visitor back to his bicycle. The kindly

priest, acknowledging to himself that he was more at home with ecclesiastical than with social etiquette, promptly forgave the lad. On second thoughts he also forgave the young girl who had addressed the obscenity to him. His mind at rest, he clambered back on to his machine and cycled down the drive.

It seemed, though versions of this particular version of the story differed, that disaster struck him at some point before he reached the gate. As he pedalled on his way, it seemed, he was lassoed from the overhanging branches of an oak tree. According to the most dramatic version of the version he was plucked out of the saddle and hung there swinging gently to and fro while his bicycle sailed on into some rhododen-dron bushes. More probably, however, the noose missed him (luckily, since it might have broken his neck) but caught on the pillion, shrunk rapidly, tightened, halted the bicycle suddenly and tipped Fr O'Meara over the handlebars. Stunned though he was by his fall he was willing to swear that as he unsteadily tried to pick himself up two smiling angelic faces were looking down on him from above. It was a matter for the police, no doubt about it. Charges of assault were prepared for the R.M., together with counter-charges of trespass (Ripon having assured his father that the priest was nothing to do with him) and theft (some apples had been stripped from trees in the orchard). Other charges were being considered and had there been a magistrate to hear them this sudden sprouting of litigation might have grown so dense and confusing as to become, inside a few days, entirely beyond resolution. But there wasn't. This representative of the foreign oppressor had received a number of menacing letters from the I.R.A. and had wisely retired. A new R.M. was expected but in the meantime criminals of all hues, includ-ing the twins, were running the streets at liberty. In fact Fr O'Meara had learned with satisfaction that while he was still removing the gravel from his grazed palms these two violent girls had been stripped and caned by their father as if they'd been boys; the thought of this retribution did something to mollify him. As for Sarah, although she had to admit that the "odious brats" had some spirit, she sympathized entirely with the unfortunate priest. Almost everything with those two girls, she said, had a habit of beginning amusingly and ending painfully.

Now, had that satisfied the Major's curiosity? If he wanted to hear the other versions he would have to come to Kilnalough, because she was getting writer's cramp...Yes, and as for his question about Edward, she never saw him these days...Since Angela was dead she no longer had any reason to go to the Majestic. Indeed, she was bored, frightfully bored, and looking forward to being amused by the Major... "Amuse me, dear Major, amuse me!" Life was intolerable in Kilnalough.

But wait! She had an idea. The Major must reply and tell her precisely, yes or no, whether he believed the stories about Ripon and the twins. He must do so immediately. It was essential, so that she'd know what sort of man the Major was... though, of course, she really knew that already. Still, he must write and tell her anyway. And by the way, perhaps she would visit him in London after all. There was a chance she would go to a clinic in France for a while. Her walking had improved greatly and she wasn't nearly such a "miserable cripple" as she had been when the Major knew her. She still, in spite of his dull letters, thought of him with affection and remained truly his.

The Major didn't know what to do about this letter. If he said he *did* believe the stories about Ripon and the twins she would accuse him of being "as literal as a lump of dough." If he said he didn't, she would almost certainly accuse him of having no sense of fun, no imagination. After two or three days' deliberation he wrote back to say that he believed parts of them (and enjoyed the other parts). A postcard was all he got in reply. It accused him of having made a cautious and typically British compromise. And it ended with the words: "I despise compromises!"

All the time this correspondence was taking place the Major's aunt continued to linger in a twilight stage between living and dying which he found most unsatisfactory. At the time of her first haemorrhage a night-nurse had been taken on, a sombre lady of middle age who had a habit of enjoining his aunt to "put a brave face on it, my dear," commenting that "Madam's pain won't last for ever," or informing her that her "only hope is in the Lord," while discreetly averting her face to eat steadily throughout the night. Though most of this woman's remarks had a religious cast and few of them were sequential she occasionally spoke of other deaths she had witnessed, invariably those of ladies in comfortable circumstances. One of them, a Mrs Baxter, had "died in the arms of Jesus." Another had provided her with food that was unsuitable. Yet another had beautiful daughters who "went to dance at balls during their mother's agony." One story she often repeated concerned the lovely and youthful Mrs Perry, far gone with tuberculosis, whose husband, a ravening brute, had claimed his marital rights until the very end, causing her to leave the sick-room for hours at a time, so that very often it would be nearly dawn before she was allowed back to comfort his victim—who had been uncomplaining, however. Describing this, she would aim black looks at the Major as if he were responsible.

Somehow this story made a very painful impression on the Major. He imagined the lovely Mrs Perry and her husband quite differently. He was sure that they had been passionately in love. What other reason could the husband have had for making love to a woman with tuberculosis? The physical act of love remained the one crumbling bridge between them. He pictured the slow nights of despair. He wondered whether the husband had also hoped to fall ill with tuberculosis. One night he had an agonizing dream about Mrs Perry and the next morning he felt so disturbed that he sought out the night-nurse and dismissed her with a month's pay. He thought: "Really, I'm still a young man...there's time enough to become morbid when I'm old."

At about this time he read about the siege of the R.I.C. barracks at Ballytrain—half a dozen constables overrun by a massive horde of Shinners—over a hundred of them, like the dervishes at Khartoum. Edward had

called them individual criminals out for what they could get. Never, thought the Major with a smile, never had so many individual criminals been seen together in one place!

The Major had invited Sarah to stay at his aunt's house as she passed through London on her way to France. Would this not be considered improper? she wanted to know. What would his aunt think? The Major replied that his aunt would certainly find nothing amiss in Sarah staying with them. Indeed, she would act as chaperone (his only worry was that the old lady, having survived so long, should die prema-turely now that her services were needed). So presently Sarah arrived.

The Major, sunk in a slough of despond, his mind as barren as the frozen snow that lay on the streets, had been awaiting her arrival with indifference, even a vague dread. But Sarah appeared to have left the malicious side of her nature in Kilnalough. She was so affectionate and ingenuous, so excited to be in London, so obviously impressed by the Major's air of authority and distinction in these new surroundings as she clung to his arm (the confidence with which she was walking these days astonished him) that in no time at all he was disarmed. In restaurants she was apprehensive lest she be "noticed." The Major mustn't let her use the wrong knife and fork or she'd die of mortification. And how did all the diners (how did the Major himself?) look so much at ease in front of these august waiters? It was a mystery to her. And the ladies wore such lovely clothes! Was the Major not ashamed to be seen with such a scarecrow as herself? On the contrary, the Major was delighted to be seen with such a pretty girl.

The splendid shops, the elegant streets...Amused and touched by her enthusiasm, the Major found himself seeing London with new and less world-weary eyes. It was perfectly true, London could be an exciting place if one allowed oneself to notice it. In the evening after dinner they sat and talked in front of a blazing fire. For a while they discussed Kilnalough. The Major had been hoping to hear more of the Majestic, but Sarah had nothing to add to her letters. Ripon and Máire were married now and living in Rathmines, but she knew no more than that. She thought that Edward and Ripon were having no more to do with each other. There'd been some terrible rows but she didn't know the details. She'd hardly seen Edward for ages, she added, gazing into the glowing embers. And then she grimaced and said that she didn't want to talk about Kilnalough, she wanted the Major to tell her about himself. And so the Major, feeling strangely at peace, found himself talking about the war. Little by little, random names and faces began to come back to him. He told Sarah first about one or two curious things that had happened: about a young Tommy who had been found dead in his bunk and the only thing they had been able to find wrong with him was a broken finger; about the shouted friendly conversations with the Germans across No-Man's-Land; about a man in the Major's regiment who had had his leg blown off and had sat in a shell-crater tying up the arteries by himself and had survived...And soon the Major was telling Sarah about incidents that until now had been frozen into a block of ice in his mind. In the warmth of her sympathy he found he could talk about things which until now he had scarcely been able to repeat to himself. A little drunk and tired, sitting there in the flickering firelight, the bubble of bitterness in his mind slowly dissolved and tears at last began to run down his cheeks for all his dead friends.

The following morning Sarah left for France. She would send the Major her address, she said.

The Major had written to Sarah an enormous letter, crammed with confidences, packed with poetic observations on life and love and every other subject under the sun. He had at last found someone to talk to! He had found someone who understood him and shared his view of the workings of the world. Everything which for want of a listener he had been unable to say for the last four or five years came foaming out of his head in a torrent of blue-black ink, all at once. The leaves of writing-paper became so thick that they would no longer fit in an ordinary envelope and, besides, he had still more to say...by the time he had finished he would be obliged to wrap up his letter in a brown-paper parcel. Not that the Major was waiting to finish his letter exactly (because the kind of letter the Major was writing is seldom voluntarily finished before the Grim Reaper bids us lay down our pens); his difficulty was more practical than aesthetic: he was unable to send Sarah his letter in instalments because she had forgotten to send him her address. As time went by, as winter turned into spring, the Major became less and less hopeful that she would remember to rectify this oversight. His flood of confidences declined to a trickle and finally dried up altogether. The Major became gloomy and sensible once more. And the grey world returned to being as grey as it had always been. In due course his aunt died.

Meanwhile, in Ireland, the troubles ebbed and flowed, now better, now worse. He could make no sense of it. It was like putting out to sea in a small boat: with the running of the waves it is impossible to tell how far one has moved over the water; all one can do is to look back to see how far one has moved from land. So in the case of Ireland all one could do was to look back to the peaceful days before the war. And they already seemed a long way away.

* * *

INDIAN UNREST

Lord Hunter's Inquiry

The Indian newspapers received by the Indian mail, says Reuter, contain further reports of the

proceedings of the Hunter Commission which is inquiring into the Indian disorders of last year. On December 3rd Captain Doveton, who administered martial law at Kasur, in his evidence, while admitting that he did invent some minor punishments during the martial-law administration, punishments less severe in form than the usual martial-law sentences, denied that he ordered any persons to be whitewashed, or made people write on the ground with their noses...

Sir Chiman Lal Setalvad turned to the feeling of the people regarding martial law. "You say the people liked martial law?" he suggested.

"Very much so," was the witness's reply.

Sir C. Setalvad: "You say the people would have liked it to become practically permanent?" "That was the impression that was given."

"Did the people actually tell you this—that the summary courts were things they liked?" "They liked people being tried by martial law, without any right of appeal. They preferred that to spending money on appeals."

Questioned in regard to the story of women of loose character having been compelled to witness flogging sentences, witness said that it was a misrepresentation, although not a deliberate one...

Continuing, Captain Doveton said that as regards his order requiring convicted persons to touch the ground with their foreheads, he had heard of this being done before. He did not mean it to be debasing.

At this stage General Barrow, addressing Lord Hunter, suggested that witness was a young officer doing his duty to the best of his ability under rather trying conditions, but that he was not a criminal.

* * *

The Major returned to Kilnalough in the middle of May, expecting the worst. Since early in the year the number of violent incidents had steadily increased. An official return of "outrages" attributed to Sinn Fein had just been published and the Major had read it with apprehension: it listed the total number of murders for the first quarter of the year as thirty-six; of "firing at persons" eighty-one; three hundred and eighty-nine raids for arms had taken place, and there had been forty-seven incendiary fires. Tired from his journey and nervous in spite of the peaceful and familiar aspect of Kilnalough station, the Major started violently when a hand was put on his shoulder. He turned sharply to find the grinning and friendly face of the station-master, who wanted to inform him that Dr Ryan was waiting outside in his motor car and would give him a lift to the Majestic.

With Dr Ryan there was a youth of sixteen or seventeen with black hair and a pale, beautiful face. The doctor, his face almost totally obscured by a muffler and a wide-brimmed black hat, muttered an introduction. This was his grandson Padraig. They were going to tea at the Majestic, he added disagreeably, and Edward had asked them to...In short: "Get in, man, there's plenty of room. We've been waiting long enough already."

Soon the long, unkempt hedges of the Majestic were unreeling beside them; beyond lay the dense, damp woods. There was an air of desolation on this side of the road, a contrast with the loose stone walls and neatly ploughed fields on the other side. But a little farther on even the open fields degenerated; unploughed, the meadows empty of cattle, the potato fields abandoned to the weeds that devour the soil so voraciously in the damp climate of Ireland. By a gate leading into one of these fields a man wearing a ragged coat stood, motionless as a rock, his eyes on the ground. As they passed he did not even raise his eyes. What was the fellow doing standing motionless in an empty field, staring at the ground? the Major wondered.

Edward must have been watching for them, because hardly had they turned in a sweep of gravel and come to a halt by the statue of Queen Victoria before he was hastening down the steps to greet them. The Major was the first to alight. Edward gripped his hand tightly and pumped it vigorously, his mouth working but unable to utter a word except "My dear chap!" Then he turned away to the others.

Only as he greeted the doctor and his grandson did the Major have a chance to notice how much Edward had changed since their last meeting. His face had become much thinner and the contours of his skull more pronounced; in manner too he appeared strangely on edge, exaggeratedly cheerful and voluble now that the initial greetings were over, and yet at the same time weary and apprehensive as he set about extricating the old man from the front seat of the motor (Dr Ryan was tired also, it seemed, but his grandson proved as nimble as a gazelle). Edward, shoving and pulling with energy at the doctor's feebly struggling limbs, cried that he had something to show his visitors, something that they couldn't help but find delightful, something that was really outside the normal orbit of the Majestic, something that was, in fact, a new departure for himself as well as for the hotel and might, who knew?, turn out from a commercial point of view to be the foundation of something big...in a word, they should all come while it was still fine (if they didn't mind waiting a few minutes before taking their tea) they should all come, before it started to rain, and see...his pigs.

The boy Padraig, who had allowed himself to look faintly interested at this extravagant preamble, pursed his lips gloomily and appeared to be unexcited by the prospect of viewing some pigs. As for Dr Ryan, he seemed positively annoyed (or perhaps he had not yet had time to recover from the indignity of being dragged out of his seat by the lapels). "Ah, pigs," he muttered testily. "To be sure." His heavy, wrinkled eyelids drooped.

The old spaniel, Rover, came up and sniffed the Major's trouser-leg.

“See, he recognizes you,” exclaimed Edward cheerfully. “You recognize your old friend Brendan, don’t you, boy?”

The dog wagged its tail weakly and, as they set off, plodded after them, the long hairs of its stomach matted with dried mud.

As they turned the corner of the house a long bloodcurdling shriek ripped through the silence.

“What on earth...?”

“The peacocks,” explained Edward. “Normally they only cry at dusk or after nightfall. I wonder what’s got into them.”

Dr Ryan said querulously: “It’s going to pour again any minute.”

“And where are they, the peacocks?” Padraig wanted to know. “Could I have some feathers off of them?”

“Of course. Remind me after tea.”

The Major looked out over the sea to where a black, massive cloud-formation was swelling towards them from over the invisible Welsh coast. It was going to pour. “They have beautiful feathers, those birds,” he mused aloud. “Why should they shriek like that?”

The land on this side of the hotel, Edward was explaining to Padraig with the old man limping along morosely a few paces behind them, was where the guests had diverted themselves in the old days. Was it not splendidly suited for the purpose? Look at the way it dropped in a series of wide terraces towards the sea. Each terrace had been reserved for a different recreation. This flat green meadow through which they were now passing had been reserved for clock-golf and bowls; the one below for lawn tennis, a dozen separate courts, each one of fine quality and, like the hard courts round by the garages, angled so that the westering sun would never shine into the eyes of the server...and it worked, assuming, of course, that none of the guests were stricken by an irrational craving to get up and take some exercise before, say, half eleven in the morning (but few, if any of them, Edward added with a sour chuckle, had ever been greatly discomfited by the rising sun, or so he understood). The soil for these courts, the draining system and the grass lawn itself had been imported from England, installed specially and with enormous care in order to emulate the heavenly growth that cloaked the courts at Wimbledon. Edward might have gone on with his explanation but at this moment Padraig spotted a peacock sitting on the broken wall that snaked down from one terrace to another, protecting them from the north wind. As he skipped over to investigate, Edward muttered: “A fine lad, Doctor, a fine lad.” But the surly old doctor merely grunted disagreeably, refusing to be mollified.

Padraig returned and together they descended a wide and imposing flight of stone steps lined at intervals with cracked urns bearing coats of arms but containing nothing more regal than a few tufts of grass, thistles, and in one of them what appeared to be a potato plant. Between the stone steps green whiskers sprouted unchecked in every crack and crevice. On the next terrace a young man stood smiling cheerfully out to sea. At the sound of footsteps he turned and, smiling down at the earth, went through the motions of digging with the spade he was holding.

“Ah there, Seán,” Edward called to him.

“Good day, sor.”

The Major noted with surprise that the foot which had come to rest, after one or two token digging motions, on the shoulder of the spade was shod in a gleaming shoe, the trouser-leg above it was neatly creased, and thrown over the young man’s shoulders and knotted round his neck was what looked like a Trinity cricket sweater.

“I say, Edward, you have a very well-turned-out gardener.”

But Edward was busy telling Padraig (who showed no sign of being interested) that the land here was ill-suited to the growing of potatoes: the soil contained a good deal of clay and held the moisture so that if it rained too copiously the potatoes would rot in the ground, likely as not, before they could be dug up and eaten. Taking this fact into account it would appear to have been a mistake to dig up the tennis courts (for, in an effort to make the land pay, one or two had been dug up). True, the ones that had been left had forgotten their aristocratic origins and “gone Irish,” the delicate grass becoming thick and succulent in the damp climate, more suitable for feeding cows than hitting forehand drives off. Not that it mattered very much since the twins (“my two little girls... about your age”) didn’t seem to care very much for the game.

“Do you play tennis?”

Padraig, after his moment of enthusiasm for the peacocks, had become sullen once more. “Indeed I do not.” Padraig hated all games; he stated as much in a loud and satisfied tone. Particularly games which involved contact with other people’s bodies.

“But tennis...” began Edward.

Having arrived at the lowest terrace, against which the sea lapped in chilly grey waves, they turned to the right, following a gravel path along the water’s edge. This path was lined by monstrously unclipped privet hedges and ended at a boat-house complete with slipway and the half-exposed rotting ribs of what had once been a large yacht; built against the boat-house was a taller square building which Edward said was the squash court. (And what, Padraig wanted to know, was a “squash” court when it was at home? It sounded mighty unpleasant whatever it was.) It was in the squash court that Edward apparently kept his pigs. He opened the door and went inside, making cooing noises. Padraig, wrinkling his nose, followed. Dr Ryan heaved a sigh and turned his ancient, lined features to the Major.

“Ach, it’s a long way for a man of eighty to walk with no tea inside him.”

Before following him inside the Major turned to look back at the hotel, which at this point was much nearer; the ground fell away sharply and one crenellated wing of it hung almost directly above. Edward’s voice from inside the squash court was calling him to have a look at his beauties, his three remarkable piglets. The building consisted of a small ante-chamber and an enormous oblong room with peeling white walls and a rotting wooden floor. The roof was of greenish glass that filled the place with a murky submarine light. In addition, Edward had lit two hurricane lanterns which hung from great metal arms riveted into the walls; the light from these poured down on mounds of straw, mud, excrement and pig-swill. The stench was intolerable.

Three piglets, glowing pink in the cascade of light from the lanterns, frisked around Edward, who was kneeling on a pile of steaming straw and doing his best to tickle their stomachs, though they were in such an ecstasy of excitement that they could hardly hold still for a moment, nipping and suckling at his fingers and tumbling over his shoes.

“Look at them, did you ever see such wonderful little fellows in all your life? Here now, calm down a bit and show your visitors how well you can behave. Here, Brendan, this is Mooney, that’s Johnston, and the one sniffing at your sock is O’Brien. We feed them mostly with stale cakes from the bakery, you see…ones that haven’t been sold. We get a couple of sacks sent down from Dublin on the train once a week: iced cakes, barm bracks, Swiss rolls, oh everything! lemon sponges, almond rings, currant buns, Battenbergs, Madeira cake…A lot of them are so fresh you wouldn’t mind eating them yourself.” And Edward gazed down with tenderness at the plump pink animals that were still whirling and somersaulting about his feet before turning to the Major for corroboration.

The Major cleared his throat for a favourable comment on the piglets. But he was silenced by a growl and an ear-splitting squeal. It was Rover, of course, who had followed them into the squash court undetected. For a few moments there was chaos while the other two pigs joined in the squealing and Edward tried to soothe them. The piglet Mooney, unaware that any creature on earth might wish him ill and perhaps thinking that the old spaniel was merely a somewhat hairy brother-pig, had playfully performed a somersault which had landed him within range of the dog’s sharp teeth. A painful nip had been administered. For a moment the piercing noise, the grovelling figure of Edward, the swaying lanterns and the asphyxiating ammoniac stench all combined with weariness from his journey to make the Major wonder whether his reason had not become unhinged.

He poked his head out of the door and took a deep breath of cool, unscented air. The relief was extraordinary. There was the sound of footsteps. A buxom girl wearing an apron was skipping towards them along the path.

“The master?” she called. “Is he there? A gentleman does be at the door.” The Major nodded and re-entered the building to tell Edward that he was wanted. The piglets had calmed down and were lying in a row on their backs having their stomachs rubbed. Getting to his feet with a grimace of annoyance, Edward said: “Look here, why don’t you have a good look at the pigs and then follow me up to the house for a spot of tea when you’ve finished? See you up there in a few minutes.” With that he hurried out. A moment later he returned to say: “By the way, would you mind dousing the lanterns before you leave?” Then he was gone again.

Dr Ryan and the Major exchanged a glance but said nothing. Padraig made a sour face and began to wipe one of his boots with a clean handful of straw. The three piglets, gradually becoming aware that the flow of pleasure over their fat pink stomachs had been interrupted, rolled over and sat up. Their three visitors stared at them grimly until, one by one, the animals crept away to a heap of oozing mud and straw in the farthest corner of the court and settled themselves with their backs to the strip of tin. From there they eyed with suspicion and alarm the hostile creatures who (in appearance, anyway) so much resembled their beloved Edward.

When he judged that they had gazed at the animals for a suitable interval the Major doused the lights (which turned the piglets as grey as rats) and ushered the doctor and his grandson out into the fresh air. The old gentleman looked very weary indeed now and his movements had become more trembling and tentative than ever. They began to climb in silence towards the looming house, with the old man leaning heavily on his grandson’s slim shoulder and thrusting at the ground with his stick. “Really,” thought the Major, “it was most inconsiderate of Edward to bring the ‘senile old codger’ all the way down here for this pig nonsense.”

On a flight of stone steps between two terraces they stopped for a rest. They had gained sufficient altitude to afford the Major a view over the strip of park-land to the south-west, and beyond to the meadow. From the next terrace up, or from the one above that, he should be able to see clear to the tenants’ farms and the rolling hills behind them. The farmhouses—he remembered them perfectly—would be clustered there on the green slopes looking, at this distance, like grey sugar cubes.

They were now taking a short cut across the penulti-mate terrace, which led them past an immense swimming-pool, a splendid-looking affair which for some reason the Major had never noticed before. Here and there bright blue tiles were visible through the green lichen that veiled its sides and they passed the peeling white skeleton of a high-diving-board; beside it a springboard hung over the black water on the surface of which, by accident or design, lay the green discs of water-lilies. “It must be fresh water,” he thought. “Rainwater, perhaps.”

As he watched, something heaved powerfully beneath the surface. “Looks as if there might be good fishing.

Pike, I wouldn't be surprised. Too bad Edward hasn't got a decent cook."

Turning a corner of the pool brought a reflection of the sky down on to the water for a moment and left the water-lilies floating in azure. He glanced back once more to see if any fish were rising, but the surface was glassy smooth. He was tempted to go back and try the springboard to see whether it had rotted through—but undoubtedly it had. And it was fitting that it should have. From here the fashionable young men, his erstwhile comrades in arms, had taken one, two, three steps, a jump, and jack-knifed into the azure. There was something moving about this remnant of a happy youth; the Major, at any rate, felt moved.

But at last they were on the final flight of steps and soon they would be sitting in armchairs drinking tea.

"We've scaled the Matterhorn, Doctor!" But the old man, head and shoulders bowed forward on to his chest, was too spent to reply.

The Major looked towards the meadow and sure enough the farmhouses were scattered like grey sugar cubes on the rolling, quilted fields. Much nearer, though (indeed, near enough to have been visible from the lower terrace if he had looked more carefully), not far from the wall of loose, flat stones which divided the park from the meadow, a man in a tattered overcoat was standing motionless, facing towards the Majestic but with his eyes on the ground. The Major wondered whether it was the same man he had noticed earlier and, as they went inside and their footsteps echoed beneath the great glass dome of the ballroom, the incongruous but disturbing thought occurred to him that perhaps this man also would not object to sharing some almost-fresh cakes with Edward's piglets. Before going off to wash and change his shirt he told Edward that there was some fellow hanging around in the meadow and Murphy was dispatched to tell the chap to buzz off. It was probably that bane of all respectable folk in Ireland, a tinker.

On an impulse he went inside. It was very dark. The heavy curtains were still half-drawn as he had left them six months earlier, only allowing the faintest glimmer of light to penetrate. The bottles and glasses on the bar glowed in the shadows; there was a strong smell of cats and some silent movement in the darkness. Looking up, he was taken aback for a moment to see a pair of disembodied yellowish eyes glaring down at him from the ceiling. It was only when he had moved to the window to draw back the curtains that he realized that the room was boiling with cats.

They were everywhere he looked; nervously patrolling the carpet in every direction; piled together in easy chairs to form random masses of fur; curled up individually on the bar stools. They picked their way daintily between the bottles and glasses. Pointed timorous heads peered out at him from beneath chairs, tables and any other object capable of giving refuge. There was even a massive marmalade animal crouching high above him, piloting the spreading antlers of a stag's head fixed to the wall (this must be the owner of the glaring yellow eyes that had startled him a moment ago). He had a moment of revulsion at this furry multitude before the room abruptly dissolved in a shattering percussion of sneezes. A fine grey cascade of dust descended slowly around him. "Well, I'll be damned, where the devil did this lot come from? All the cats in Kilnalough must be using the Majestic to breed in... and not all of them are wild either." Indeed, led by the giant marmalade cat which from the stag's brow had launched itself heavily into the air to land on the back of a chair and thence to slither to the floor, they were moving towards him making the most fearful noise. In a moment he was up to his shins in a seething carpet of fur.

He moved brusquely, however, and the animals scattered and watched him in fear. The smell had become nauseating. He tried to open the window but the wooden frame must have swollen with the dampness; it was wedged tight, immovable. He was about to leave when his eye fell on the envelope which lay on the bar. It was the letter from Angela which Edward had handed to him on the day of her funeral; his name was written on the envelope in the precise handwriting which had once been so familiar. He thought of it lying here, Angela's final message to him, through the long months he had been away, the cats multiplying around it, the seasons revolving. Uneasily he opened it...but he did not read it. It was much too long. He put it in his pocket and picked his way sadly through the cats to the door.

In the Palm Court the Major was greeted by Edward with a fresh burst of enthusiasm, as if the few minutes which had elapsed had been yet another long separation. No sooner had the Major forced his way through the new and astonishing growth of bamboo that threatened to occlude the entrance entirely (for here too the seasons had continued to revolve) when Edward was on his feet calling: "Here he is, the man himself. Come here, Brendan, and explain why you haven't been keeping in touch with us all this time...Eh? Let's hear his excuses, what! Damned if the fellow hasn't been too busy chasing the ladies to give his old friends a thought. Doctor, what d'you think? What d'you make of a friend who won't write letters, poor sort of a chap, isn't he? And I'm dashed if he hasn't put on weight into the bargain. A bit of riding is what he needs, I should think, and a few early mornings out with a gun and a dog...How does that sound to you, Brendan? Not so bad, eh? I thought you'd get tired of being citified sooner or later. Now then, come and tell us all your news, old man. Sit here so we can have a look at you. Yes, that one looks solid enough...pull it up a bit and I'll do the honours. Och, yes, I have to do it all m'self these days, I'm turning into an old woman so I am, a real old woman. We started. You don't mind, do you? Thought we wouldn't wait for the tea to get cold..."

While the Major sipped his tea and peered curiously around at his scarcely familiar surroundings Edward fired questions at him, flitting from one subject to another, as often as not without waiting for replies. Such

was his state of excitement that he could scarcely keep still. Indeed, he kept jumping to his feet to make unnecessary adjustments to the table.

"What was Ascot like last year?" he would cry gaily, handing everyone an extra teaspoon. "You must have been there ...now don't tell me you weren't. Yes? Yes? No, wait a minute, try a fill of this and see how you like it. I got the man in Fox's to make it up specially...a special blend, my own concoction, thought I'd try it out on you, see how you like it. No, wait, have a slice of cake first. Bewley's. They say it's very good, don't know much about cake m'self, but they say it's a good one...Did I tell you I'd taken up science again? Have to keep the old brain from getting rusty, don't we? Body and mind. Body and mind. Body and soul, as Sammy would tell you. Never had any time for Ascot, Brendan. Ascot is for the ladies, m'father used to say, the men just stand there like stuffed parrots. Give me a good point-to-point any day where there's none of that nonsense. Used to let poor Angie and her mother bully me into it sometimes. (Poor Angela, echoed the Major in his thoughts, feeling a remote ache of compassion from the folded wad of paper in his breast pocket.) Didn't care for it, though...Now, young man, what'll you have? Another slice of cake to put some muscle on you, eh? And you, Doctor? More tea? Now, Brendan, frankly I don't know what this country is coming to...Have they gone mad over there in London? You tell us, you've just come from there...have they gone mad or what? The bloody Shinners are getting away with murder. Land-grabbing is the latest. Pious articles in the papers about what they call 'land-hunger in the west' and d'you know what it is? They're forcing chaps to sign over their land at gunpoint for a pittance..."

"Don't be a damn fool, Edward!" the doctor said distinctly.

"There, you see, Brendan," Edward went on grimly. "You see what I mean. The good doctor and I have been having words about this already. D'you know that they've even been trying it on with me?" And leaping to his feet once again Edward seized a bread-knife and began to slash away at the foliage with it as if it were a machete. And it was true that the growth of ferns, creepers, rubber-plants and God only knew what had become so luxuriant as to be altogether beyond a joke. Whereas previously the majority of the chairs and tables had been available, here and there, in clearings joined by a network of trails, now all but a few of them had been engulfed by the advancing green tide. While Edward slashed away with the bread-knife the Major, anxious to change the subject, observed politely that he had never in his life seen indoor plants "succeed" so well. Edward, his exuberance subsiding abruptly, murmured something indistinct about the system of irrigation, then something further about sewage and the septic tank. "A devil's own job" something would be "and frankly the expense..." With a sigh he kicked the slashed leaves and twigs into a pile beside the table and slumped back into his chair.

"And anyway, what does it matter in the long run?" the Major understood him to murmur very softly, eyes raised, mouth open, to the great skylight above them, itself almost obliterated by vegetation. Rover, who had been dozing with his chin on the Major's instep, went over to inspect the pile of leaves, lifted a leg to sprinkle them with a few drops of urine before, inertia overcoming him, he rolled over on to his side to doze off once more.

There was a long silence as they sat there in the green-ish gloom. The old man was motionless, deeply sunk in an armchair just as the Major remembered him from his first visit and, for all one knew, fast asleep behind the drooping lids. The Major noted with dismay that the doctor's flies were undone; a fold of flannel was protruding like the stuffing from a broken doll. Really! someone should have reminded the poor old fellow; at his age one couldn't be blamed for such a lapse. And why had nobody thought of removing his hat? He looked absurd sitting there at the tea-table wearing a hat (though it was true that the foliage made one feel as if one were out of doors).

"You said I could have some peacock feathers," Padraig said plaintively, but Edward made no reply and silence fell once more.

A faint rustling sound became audible, as of someone making his way with caution along one of the trails through the thicket. There had previously been a way through, the Major remembered, from one end of the Palm Court to the other (leading to a spiral staircase down into the cellars). It seemed, to judge by the steadily approaching rustle of leaves, that against all probability this trail was still practicable. The noise of movement stopped for a moment near at hand, and there was a deep sigh, a long exhalation of breath, almost a sob. Then the noise started again. In a moment whoever it was would step into view from behind an extraordinarily powerful tropical shrub which seemed to have drilled its roots right through the tiles of the floor into the oozing darkness below. No sound but for the rustling footsteps. Even the doctor appeared to have stopped breathing. The Major tried to see past the hairy, curving, reticulated trunk of this tree, to distinguish (between succulent, oily leaves as big as dinner-plates) the tiny figure that slowly shuffled into sight. It was old Mrs Rappaport.

She stopped in the clearing opposite the tea-table and turned her sightless eyes in their direction.

"Edward!"

Edward said nothing but continued to sit there as if made of stone.

"Edward, I know you're there," the old lady repeated shrilly. "Edward!"

Edward looked agonized but said nothing. After a long pause the old lady turned and began to move forward again. For what seemed an age they listened to the decreasing rustle of her progress followed by a prolonged wrestling with the grove of bamboo shoots. Listening to the interminable thrashing as she tried to

escape from the toils of bamboo, the Major wondered whether he should go to her assistance. But at last the thrashing stopped. Mrs Rappaport had won through into the residents' lounge.

Silence returned and it seemed to the Major that the greenish gloom had deepened into an intolerable darkness. If only the famous "Do More" generator had been working they could have repulsed this aqueous darkness with a cleansing flood of electric light. He looked round for the tall-stemmed lamp which Angela had once switched on in this very glade, but although it was no doubt still somewhere near at hand (few things being ever deliberately changed at the Majestic) there was no longer any way of telling which of these leafy shrubs possessed a tubular metal trunk and glass corolla.

"Have you had enough to eat, old chap?"

"Eh?" said the Major.

Edward was talking to the dog, however. After a moment, though, as if the sound of his own voice had startled him into activity, he stirred uncomfortably and looked at his guests. He stood up for an instant, without pushing his chair back, then sat down again.

"Glad to hear you're something of a sportsman," he said to Padraig with an effort. "Good for a young fellow...cricket, hockey and so forth. Mind you, I was never much of a cricketer myself...Too impatient with it all, I suppose."

"I hate cricket," Padraig said sullenly.

Whether or not this exchange served to clear the air, Dr Ryan now also began to speak, though so softly that it was all the Major could do to make out what he was saying. Several moments passed before he realized that the old fellow had begun to speak hoarsely, comfortingly, consolingly to Edward of someone who had died...and several more moments before he realized that that someone was Angela, as if she had only been dead for a matter of hours rather than months.

People are insubstantial, he understood the old man to be saying, a doctor should know that better than anyone. They are with us for a while and then they disappear and there is nothing to be done about it...A man must not let himself become bitter and defeated because of this state of affairs, because really there is no point to it...There is no rock of ages cleft for anyone and one must accept the fact that a person ("You too, Edward, and the Major, and this young boy as well")...a person is only a very temporary and makeshift affair, as is the love one has for him...And so Edward must understand that this young girl who had just died, his beloved daughter Angela whom he, Dr Ryan, had assisted into the world, even at the height of her youth and health was temporary and insubstantial because...people are insubstan-tial. They really do not ever last...They never last. A doctor should know. People never last.

Edward laughed heartily and, lighting a candle, said: "I remember one time some fellows in Trinity asked me to bowl in the practice nets with them (used to like to keep myself in trim during the vacations) and I'm damned if I didn't have such a swelled head in those days that I made up some cock-and-bull story about being a demon bowler. Well, they had the nets up against the wall, of course. First ball I bowled (fella called Moore was batting, later played for the Gentlemen of Ireland), first ball, mind you, I'm dashed if it didn't sail clean over the batsman, over the back of the net, over the wall, bounced on the roof of a carriage in Nassau Street and went half-way up Dawson Street! Eh? What? How about that for a piece of bowling, eh? You can bet my face was like a beetroot and, by Jove, did they laugh at me...Och, after that I stuck to the gloves, I can tell you." Bubbling with mirth Edward gradually subsided once more.

On an impulse the Major had slipped Angela's letter out of his pocket and (overcome by curiosity and a vague dread as to what it might contain) was straining his eyes in the candle-lit gloom to read it, while the doctor began a rambling and incoherent monologue about there being a new spirit in Ireland (it was clear that the old chap was so exhausted and his mind so fogged that he no longer knew where he was or what he was talking about).

Ah, it was as he thought, *Dearest Brendan*—the regular handwriting, line after line like small waves relentlessly lapping a gentle shore. *On my dressing-table*—the mirror, the brushes, the jewellery-cases, even a photograph of himself. *From the window of my bedroom I can see*...but what could she see? Only two elms and an oak, reputed to be a hundred and fifty years old, the second or third oldest tree on the estate, the edge of a path where the dogs sometimes wandered, but at this distance she could hardly recognize them...Foch or Fritz? Collie or Flash? They were too far away, in a sense (thought the Major) they were too particular now...only a generality like the circling of the planets could hold her attention now. But *at twelve minutes past eleven the doctor came* and he and Angela had a long chat which, for all that, didn't prevent her noticing and recording that *one of his waistcoat buttons was dangling by a thread* and that there was a copious spot of what was undoubtedly porridge on his jacket...(Meanwhile the doctor muttered in the querulous tones of a tired old man: "There's a new spirit in Ireland; I can feel it, you know, and see it everywhere. The British are finished here. The issue is no longer in doubt, hasn't been for the last twenty years. There's nothing now except a huge army that'll keep Ireland under the British yoke. If you take my advice, Edward, you'll give in gracefully now while you still can, you'll give them the land they're asking for, because, if you don't, they'll take it anyway...Parnell was the last man who could have preserved some sort of life for the British in Ireland but the damn fools didn't realize it, thought he was their enemy! Serves 'em right. I've no sympathy for them, they've lived here for generations like cocks in pastry without a thought for the sufferings of the people. Now it's their turn and I'll shed no tears for them...Ach, things have changed since I was a boy...they have a different look to

them, the people, it would take a fool not to see it.")

"But this is an enormous letter," thought the Major, appalled, hefting the wad of crinkly paper in his hand. "It would take a prodigious effort even to write such a letter if one were weakened by illness, if one were unable to take proper nourishment (he thought with a pang of the untouched trays of food ferried up and down the stairs) and...and the detail in it is intolerable."

("Of course, I was a child then, too young to remember those days, but my father had seen it and my uncles too, God rest them, they were old men before thirty with the worry and the trouble...and I remember the way people talked of it, you know. It must be God's will, they'd say. He sent it to punish us, d'ye see? so what is there for a man to do? Sure we'll have to go to another country, says he, to America on a ship because in Ireland we'll never do any good; we'll die for sure and there'll be no help for it...Man, I'd say, what need is there to leave? The hunger is over and there's food enough. But sure it'll come again, says he, you'd never know...'tis best to leave Ireland. B'the Lord Harry, in those days they were leaving so quick they were even starving there on the quays of New York. There's no luck in Ireland, they'd tell you...")

"There's no luck in Ireland," agreed Edward, winking at the Major, who was thinking: "Such detail is intolerable,"—the design of the carpet over which the shrinking white feet of the patient still continued to patter day after day, morning and evening, to perform her ablutions...till the day inevitably came (he had been waiting for it with despair), till the page inevitably came when the pitcher and the bowl and the sponge came to *her* over the carpet and the carpet dropped out of her world and she too prepared to drop out of her world. "Such detail is quite obviously intolerable," thought the Major as Edward reached out in the gloom to feel whether the teapot's plump belly was still warm, at the same time absent-mindedly handing the sugar-bowl to the doctor, who did not need it and was muttering incoherent words to the effect that if Edward or anyone else laughed at what he was saying it was because he or they, was or were, British black-guards and fools (some part of the Major's brain had remained on duty to straighten out the grammar while he thought: "Really, when I arrived and attempted to kiss her hand she flinched away from me as she might have flinched from some uncouth stranger.").

"Those were the days," declared Edward absently, perhaps still thinking of the day he had bowled a cricket-ball up Dawson Street.

"They certainly were *not*!" snapped the doctor.

So why should she write all this? Page after page to someone she scarcely knew. The relentlessly regular handwriting lapped rhythmically on. Only on the last few pages did it begin to waver a little.

I shall not die now.

Brendan, if I die who will look after you when I am gone?

And there were a number of other observations, feebly scratched out, which the Major had not the heart to decipher.

"People are insubstantial," murmured the doctor, as his bowler-hatted head drooped sleepily on to his chest. "They never last. Of course, it makes no difference in the long run."

It was signed, without the usual qualification about the "loving fiancée," quite simply: *Angela.*

"The old chap's fallen asleep," Edward said. "Such a lot of rot he talks...I'm afraid he's becoming a bit you-know-what."

Getting to his feet he shouted deafeningly to Murphy to bring more candles because it had become infernally dark. The Major returned the letter to his pocket. Glancing down, he noted with dismay that his own flies were undone. He fumbled with them hastily before Murphy arrived with more candles.

"Can I have some peacock feathers?" demanded Padraig stubbornly. "You promised."

"Of course, of course," Edward told him genially. "Look, why don't you go and ask the twins for some; I'm sure they have lots of that sort of thing. Murphy, show this young man where he can find the girls."

When Padraig had departed with Murphy the Major asked: "What are the twins doing at home? Shouldn't they be at school?"

"They were sent home," replied Edward sombrely. "A spot of bother at school." He sighed but did not elaborate.

They waited in silence for Padraig to return. Presently they heard the thrashing and rustling of his advent. A few moments later he appeared out of the darkness. The Major stared at him. His face was flushed and indignant and he seemed close to tears. His hair had been ruffled and his shirt was hanging out at the back. In one hand he clutched a bunch of peacock feathers.

Edward looked at him with concern, seemed about to say something but changed his mind. At length he sighed again and said that he thought it was about time to wake the doctor and send him home.

Before leaving, the doctor, who had been restored by his brief nap and now remembered why he had come, said: "For the last time, Edward, will you come to some arrangement with the farmers about the land, for your own good as much as for theirs?"

"So far I have received two threatening letters. Both of them I have given to the District Inspector. There happens to be a law in the land which protects a man's private property and I have no intention of giving in to threats."

"Is that your last word?"

"Yes," Edward replied curtly.

* * *

LENIN AND POLAND

"*To be delivered from her Oppressors*"

The Paris *Matin* says: "A wireless message has been transmitted from Moscow announcing in glowing terms that the whole of Russia is rising to fight Poland. On May 6th the majority of the Moscow garrison of 120,000 men left the Soviet capital for the Dnieper front. Lenin and Trotsky addressed the troops. Lenin said: 'We do not want to fight Poland but we are going to deliver her from her oppressors. Death to the Polish landlords! Long live the Polish Workers' and Peasants' Republic!'"

* * *

LAWLESSNESS NEAR KILKENNY

Ladies Terrorized by Armed Men

Late on Monday night considerable excitement was caused in Kilkenny by the news of the "hold up" at Troyswood a mile outside the city, by masked men armed with revolvers, of a number of motor cars and horsed carriages which were taking ladies and gentlemen, in whose number were included Major J.B. Loftus, D.L., J.P., Mount Loftus, and Sir Hercules Langrishe, Bart, Knocktopher Abbey, to a ball at the house of Captain J.E. St. George, R.M., Kilrush House, Freshford, about ten miles from Kilkenny City. A barricade of large stones was placed across the road.

Some of the cars did not pull up immediately when called upon to stop and several shots were discharged, but no one was injured, although some of the passengers say that the bullets whizzed very near them.

All the parties, who were in evening dress, were huddled together under a ditch while the destruction of the engines was carried out, and some of the ladies were very much frightened. Other horsed carriages came on the scene shortly afterwards and the raiders decamped, leaving their victims to get home as best they could.

Yesterday morning six motor cars were lined up on the side of the road, and the engines appeared to have been smashed with some heavy, blunt instrument. In the corner of the field where the drivers and passengers were placed there were remnants of chocolate boxes and cigarette packets.

* * *

Little had changed in Edward's study since the Major had first seen it on his first day in Kilnalough when they had come to arm themselves against "the Shinner on the lawn." There was the same solidly tangled mass of sporting equipment on the sofa. The drawer containing ammunition still lay on the floor, though the Persian cat (wisely disdaining the community in the Imperial Bar) had forsaken it for the superior comfort of an enormous greyish-white sweater that lay in one corner like a dead sheep. From under the window there came a steady creaking sound: the Major leaned out to investigate. In the yard below was a circle of brick surmounted by a huge horizontal cartwheel with worn wooden handles; against these handles two men were toiling, heads bowed with the exertion, round and round, straining like pit ponies.

"What on earth are they doing?"

"Pumping water up to the tanks on the roof. The other well by the kitchens is for drinking water, fills up from an underground spring. Lovely water...though for some reason it makes a weird cup of tea. You may have noticed, Brendan, that we sometimes get peculiar objects in the bath-water. Can't be helped. One of the old ladies was complaining she had a dead tadpole the other day. Better than a live one, I suppose." Without changing his tone he added: "Life has been hell these last few months."

"I've been meaning to ask you about Ripon. I heard they were living in Rathmines."

"Ripon is a wash-out," Edward said bleakly. "I don't want to hear his name mentioned again. It's not that he took up with a Catholic girl, it's not just that. I'm not so narrow-minded that I don't know there are decent fellows among the Catholics in Ireland and plenty of 'em. I'd have put a stop to it if I could, of course, because mixed marriages don't go down well in this country, with one lot or the other... Besides, I don't want grandchildren of mine to be brought up believing all that unhealthy nonsense they teach them. All the same, if that's what the boy had set his heart on I wouldn't have stood in his way. He could have come to me and talked it over, man to man. He knew that. I may be an old fogey but I'm not a tyrant..." Edward paused and moodily looked at his watch. For a moment there was silence, then he said: "Come along to the lodge with me. There's something I want to show you."

They put on their hats and set off down the drive. The day was mild, overcast; although it had not been raining there was a smell of damp grass which the Major now always thought of as the smell of the Irish countryside.

"Ripon's a wash-out," Edward repeated. "I suppose everyone knew that except me. I suppose you realized it, Brendan, as soon as you set eyes on him..."

"Well, no," murmured the Major diffidently, but Edward was not listening.

"Going behind my back and doing what he did...playing the cad with an innocent young girl (and a Catholic at that!), getting her in trouble as if she were a common housemaid, that's something I'll not stand for. He's disgraced me and he's disgraced his sisters."

They walked on in silence. The Major could hear the dull continuous roar of the sea from somewhere behind the trees which were thickening into dense woods, matted with undergrowth and strung with brambles like trip-wires. They reached the end of the drive and the ruined lodge came into sight. Edward led the Major through some low bushes to the side of the building that faced the road. Here, high up on a part of the wall that had not been engulfed by ivy, a notice had been stuck.

"How d'you like that for cheek?"

The Major stepped forward to read it.

1. Whereas the spies and traitors known as the Royal Irish Constabulary are holding this country for the enemy, and whereas said spies and bloodhounds are conspiring with the enemy to bomb and bayonet and otherwise outrage a peaceful, law-abiding and liberty-loving people;

2. Wherefore we do hereby proclaim and suppress said spies and traitors, and do hereby solemnly warn prospective recruits that they join the R.I.C. at their own peril. All nations are agreed as to the fate of traitors. It has the sanction of God and man.

By order of the G.O.C.
Irish Republican Army

The Major had read of these posters in the newspapers but this was the first he had seen with his own eyes.

"The ruffians slip in during the night when they think they're safe. Murphy should be here in a minute; I told him to bring along something to scrape it off with."

"But what I don't see," said the Major with a smile, "is why they should think that 'said spies and bloodhounds' are anxious to conspire in your drive. After all, they could surely have found a more visible spot."

"We have a few young chaps staying at the hotel at the moment," Edward told him. "Ex-army officers brought over from England to give a hand to the R.I.C. They're supposed to be the first of a new auxiliary force they've started recruiting. You won't have seen them about yet, I expect, because I've quartered them in the Prince Consort wing by themselves. They didn't get on with the old ladies. The Prince Consort wing is over the stables, can't see it from here, of course. They have their own mess there and so forth. We had them in the main building at first but they were rather boisterous, just schoolboys, really (though they've done their bit, mind you, they've been in the trenches)...Trouble was they kept teasing the old girls; one of them kept on whipping out a bayonet and pretending to cut their throats...But they're not a bad lot of chaps. Expect you'll run into them round about. They use the tennis courts a bit. Ah, there's Murphy."

Murphy had appeared, carrying a hoe. Edward directed him to scrape off the notice and the old manservant advanced on the lodge feebly brandishing his implement. But the notice had been stuck well up on the wall and was out of his reach.

"We need something to stand on," the Major said.

"Right you are," said Edward. "Come here, Murphy. Major, you hand me the hoe and I'll climb on Murphy's shoulders." He gave the hoe to the Major. "Come on, man, we haven't got all day," he added to the decrepit manservant, who was shuffling forward with every sign of reluctance. The Major looked dubiously at Murphy's frail shoulders.

"Maybe we'd better get a ladder from somewhere."

"Nonsense. Now hold still, Murphy. Hang on to the trunk of this tree while I'm getting up. For God's sake, man, we're never going to get anywhere if you're going to wilt like that every time I touch you."

But time and time again, just as Edward seemed on the point of throwing his glistening shoe and beautifully trousered leg over the old servant's thin shoulders, he would begin to wilt in anticipation. Edward stormed at him for having no backbone and ordered him not to be so faint-hearted—all to no avail. In the end they had to leave the notice where it was. Edward stalked angrily up the drive. Murphy, relief written all over his cadaverous features, vanished into the trees. And the Major was left to his own devices.

He spent the afternoon in the company of the twins. There was a row going on between them and Edward; he did not know what it was all about but suspected it had something to do with their being sent home from school. In any event, Edward was taking a firm line with them (or so he told the Major). Any disobedience or lack of respect should be instantly reported to him and they would be dealt with. Part of their punishment, it seemed, was to spend the afternoon with the Major (who was offended by the idea); they were to go with him in the Daimler and show him the whereabouts of a remarkable trout stream. These days the Major was only faintly interested in fishing, but he had nothing better to do. Though Faith and Charity had a chastened air they looked remarkably pretty in their navy-blue dresses with white lace collars encircling their slender necks. The Major felt sorry for them.

"Which is which, and how can I tell?"

"I'm Charity and she's Faith," one of them said. "Faith is bigger there," she added, pointing at Faith's chest. Both girls smiled wanly.

Throughout the afternoon, as they motored through the low rolling hills, the twins sat on the back seat in attitudes of meek dejection, slim fingers lifted to entwine the braided velvet straps, each the mirror-image of the other. "What charming girls! Edward is being much too hard on them."

He modified this opinion a day or two later, however. As an additional punishment a daily lesson with Evans, the tutor, had been ordained by Edward to take place in the writing-room. Passing the open door one afternoon, the Major paused to listen.

"How do you say in French, Mr Evans, 'The buttons are falling off my jacket and I need a clean collar'?" one of the twins was asking innocently.

"How do you say, 'I've got boils on my neck because I never wash it'?"

"How do you say, 'I have ideas beyond my station'?"

"What does '*amavi puellam*' mean?"

"How do you say in Latin, Mr Evans, 'My pasty white face is blushing all over'?"

"Sharpen my pencil, Evans, 'fraid I've just broken it again."

"Any more of this and I'll report you to your father."

"Any more of what? We're only asking questions."

"Aren't we even allowed to ask questions?"

The Major moved on. He had heard enough.

Later that same afternoon, while taking a stroll with old Miss Johnston in the Chinese Garden ("If you ask me it's an Irish Chinese Garden," Miss Johnston said with a sniff, looking round at the thick beds of tangled weeds and seeded flowers), their path crossed that of a young man in khaki tunic, breeches and puttees, wearing on his head a tam o'shanter with the crowned-harp badge of the R.I.C. The Major's eyes were drawn to the bandolier he wore across his chest and the black leather belt holding a bayonet scabbard; on his right thigh rested an open revolver holster. It was shocking, somehow, to meet this man in the peaceful wilderness of the garden, a sharp and unpleasant reminder of the incidents the Major had read about in the newspapers but could never quite visualize, any more than he could now visualize the shooting of the old man in Ballsbridge that he had witnessed. As they passed, the young man grinned sardonically and, winking at the Major, drew a finger across his throat from ear to ear.

"Gutter-snipe!" hissed Miss Johnston indignantly. "To think the R.I.C. is taking on young men like that!"

And it took all the Major's considerate inquiries about her nephews, her nieces and the state of her health ("Chilblains even in midsummer in this hotel, Major. I've never known such draughts...") to smooth her ruffled plumage.

And yet they were all ex-officers, these men, so Edward assured him later. One had to remember, though, that to be an officer in 1920 was not the same thing as being an officer in 1914. A lot of the older sort (their very qualities of bravery, steadfast obedience to the call of duty, chivalry and so forth acting as so many banana skins on the road to survival) had disappeared in the holocaust and had had to be replaced. It was also true that these new men, and the great number who would soon be following them to a meagre six weeks of police training at the Curragh, were among the least favourably placed of the countless demobilized officers who now found themselves having to earn a living once more. All the same, though one made allowances (and Edward was always ready to make allowances for men who had served in the trenches), there *were* limits. The old kind, the officer who was also a gentleman, would never have gone about frightening old ladies. So thought Edward. What did the Major think?

The Major agreed, but thought to himself that these "men from the trenches" who were being paid a pound a day to keep a few wild Irishmen in order might well have trouble taking anything very seriously—whether the Irish, the old ladies, or their own selves.

At the same time he was disturbed by their presence. These men (individually they were charming, Edward told him) were unpredictable and still estranged from the accepted standards of life in peacetime—not that one could call Ireland very peaceful these days. As he was passing the Prince Consort wing a day or two later a window exploded in a sparkling burst of splinters, a laughing head appeared and a hand was held out to see if it was raining. Occasionally too one heard pistol shots and laughter in the long summer evenings; Edward had laid out a pistol-range in the clearing behind the lodge where the I.R.A. notice had been posted. In no time at all the notice had melted away under a hail of bullets and hung in unrecognizable shreds. One day the Major picked up a dead rabbit on the edge of the lawn. Its body was riddled with bullets.

This rabbit, as it happened, had been a favourite of the Major's. Old and fat, it had been partly tamed by the twins when they were small children. They had lost interest, of course, as they grew older, and no longer remembered to feed it. The rabbit, however, had not forgotten the halcyon days of carrots and dandelion leaves. Thinner and thinner as time went by, it had nevertheless continued to haunt the fringes of the wood like a forsaken lover. Poor rabbit! Moved and angry (but the "men from the trenches" were not to know that this was not a wild rabbit), the Major went to break the news to the twins, who were down by the tennis courts trying to persuade Seán Murphy to teach them how to drive the Standard (though Edward had forbidden this until they were older). The twins were not as upset as the Major expected them to be.

“Can we eat him?” they wanted to know.

“He’s already buried.”

“We could dig him up,” Faith suggested. “Aren’t rabbits’ feet supposed to be lucky?”

But the Major said he had forgotten where the grave was.

“Were the bullet-holes bad?”

“How d’you mean? They were bad for the rabbit.”

“No, I was just thinking we could have made a fur hat,” said Charity, “if there weren’t too many holes in him.”

“I say, Brendan, you aren’t any good at arithmetic, are you? Daddy has set that dreadful tutor person on us and now he’s threatening to look at our homework when it’s been corrected.”

“Try Mr Norton. He’s supposed to be good at that sort of thing.”

Mr Norton was a man in his seventies, a recent arrival at the Majestic; he had the reputation, fostered by himself, of having been a mathematical genius, drained in his youth, however, of energy and fortune by a weakness for beautiful women.

“We asked him...”

“But he always wants us to sit on his knee as if we were children.”

“And his breath smells horrid.”

Now that the Imperial Bar had been rendered uninhabitable by the colony of cats the Major sometimes took one of Edward’s motor cars into Kilnalough in the evening for a drink at the Golf Club. There one evening he met Boy O’Neill, the solicitor, who greeted him like an old friend, although it was almost a year since the Peace Day parade when they had last met. O’Neill’s appearance had changed dramatically and the Major could now scarcely recognize the timid, bony invalid he had first met at Angela’s tea-party. Dressed in a baggy tweed jacket with bulging pockets, O’Neill appeared more swollen and aggressive than ever. There was a subdued irritation about the man which made one ill at ease when talking to him; one had the feeling that O’Neill was capable at any moment of abandoning reason altogether and finishing the argument with an uppercut. The Major sat watching the wads of jaw-muscle thickening as he talked: he had just finished eighteen holes, he declared, and had never felt better in his life. A hot shower, a drink, and now he was off home for a good meal. He unslung the clinking golf-bag from his shoulder and heaved it into an armchair, showing no impatience to depart. Eyeing the golf-bag, the Major noticed nestling between a mashie niblick, a jigger and the bulging wooden head of a driver what he at first thought was a club without a head—but no, it was the barrel of a rifle.

“No half measures, eh?”

“I can see you haven’t been reading the papers, Major. Couple of army chaps were shot down on a links in Tipperary the other day...unarmed men. Didn’t have a chance out there with no shelter, nobody passing by. The Shinners are brave enough when the other fella doesn’t have a gun. They’ll run like rabbits if they know you’re armed.”

The Major only glanced at the newspaper these days, tired of trying to comprehend a situation which defied comprehension, a war without battles or trenches. Why should one bother with the details: the raids for arms, the shootings of policemen, the intimidations? What could one learn from the details of chaos? Every now and then, however, he would become aware with a feeling of shock that, for all its lack of pattern, the situation was different, and always a little worse.

Satisfied with the Major’s look of dismay, O’Neill was now saying confidently that there was no need to worry. “All this will be cleared up now within five or six weeks, you can take it from me.”

“How d’you know?” asked the Major hopefully, thinking that perhaps O’Neill had heard something. “Two reasons,” declared O’Neill. “One, reinforcements are coming from England with this new recruiting campaign. Two, because of the nature of the Irish people. The Irish are a quick-tempered lot but they don’t hold a grudge for long. They’re good at heart, you see. Besides, they’re too inefficient to get anywhere by themselves...I speak, mind you, of the Southerners; Ulstermen are a different kettle of fish. Besides, all Ireland’s best leaders have been Englishmen; look at Parnell.”

“Yes, yes, to be sure,” agreed the Major dubiously. “It must end soon. That’s what we used to say in the trenches,” he added with a faint smile.

“Of course, of course,” O’Neill said, failing to perceive the Major’s irony. “You can take my word for it. I’ve just been having a drink with the army lads we have here now and I don’t think they’ll stand for much nonsense from Paddy Pig.”

“You mean the men staying at the Majestic? I didn’t think they had much time for us locals.”

“They’re splendid chaps, you can take it from me,” replied O’Neill, who was now taking off his bulging jacket and showed less sign of leaving than ever. “It’s just that they don’t really know who they can trust over here and, frankly, I don’t blame them for that. Come in with me now to the bar and I’ll introduce you.”

“Really, thanks all the same...” protested the Major, but O’Neill was already on his feet and beckoning imperiously with a forearm as thick as a leg of lamb. The Major followed him reluctantly. O’Neill’s studded shoes clicked on the tiles of the corridor and bit into the worn wood of the locker room where a fat naked gentleman was vigorously towelling his quivering bottom. They passed through into the Members’ Bar.

“Just a minute,” the Major said. “There’s someone I must say hello to.”

Mr Devlin, dapper and smiling, was hastening towards him. He was delighted to see the Major back amongst them once more and must express his thanks for the kindness he had shown to his daughter Sarah on her way to France and how was the Major's dear auntie who had also been so kind...("Ah, deceased is she? Indeed now, I'm sorry to hear it.") And was the Major himself in better health than he had been? It must have been a great worry and a terrible grief for him to be losing his auntie like that...And as for Sarah she would be back one of these days and he knew that she would look forward to seeing the Major as much as he himself did and besides they would probably be meeting here at the links from now on because he had "a little job to do"...He paused expectantly.

"Oh?"

Yes, he'd be spending some considerable time here in the evenings because he had been elected treasurer, there was a notice on the notice-board, the Major probably hadn't had a chance to see it yet. "And it's all thanks to the influence of a certain person who has been very good to me and my family, very good...I'll say no more...it's a great honour."

The "men from the trenches," four of them, were sitting together at the curve of the bar by a window looking out over the eighteenth green and the gently ascending slope of fairway that led up to it. None of the members, apart from O'Neill, were sitting near them, and for a good reason. They had caused some dismay, the Major had heard, by installing themselves here without invitation; after all, there was a lounge available for ladies and non-members (providing that they were respectable); the secretary had affably pointed this out on the occasion of their first visit. They had listened politely enough; there had not been a scene. But though there had not been a scene the trouble was that they had not moved either. The secretary's smile had to some extent congealed on his lips but, as he explained to a special meeting of the committee, these fellows were, after all, over here risking their lives to maintain law and order in Ireland (not to mention the fact that they also happened to be armed to the teeth), so one did not want to deal too harshly with them, throw them out on their ears and so forth. The committee had pondered the problem and come up with a solution brilliant in its simplicity. The "men from the trenches" should be invited to become members. The secretary had been dispatched there and then, on the spot, to deliver this generous invitation...But he had returned almost immediately with the news that they had declined. Once more they had listened politely while he talked about members' fees, rules, rights and obligations and then said, "No thanks." It was preposterous, everyone agreed that it was. All the same, the objection to dealing harshly with them, the one about risking their lives to maintain law and order (as well as the other one), remained and one could not simply ignore it. In the end, after much discussion, a notice had been posted on the bulletin board announcing that all *senior* personnel of the R.I.C. had been declared honorary members for the duration of the emergency (one couldn't, of course, open the doors to a horde of other ranks, splendid fellows though some of them no doubt were). The Major, who thought the secretary a pompous ass, had enjoyed this affair. But now that he saw the men sitting there, cold and calm, he had to admit that he would not like to have been the person with the job of ordering them to leave.

"Back again like a bad penny," O'Neill was saying with chilling heartiness. "Want you to meet an old pal, Major Archer. Now I wonder if I can get this straight...Captain Bolton, Lieutenants...let me see, Pike, Berry, and Foster-Smith. How's that for a memory, eh?"

"Sergeants now, old boy," said Foster-Smith, whose prominent teeth and thinning hair gave him a foolish appearance; he was very slight, his breeches hung in folds from thighs that were no thicker than wine-bottles.

It was Pike whose head the Major had seen appearing through the broken window at the Majestic; he looked a jolly fellow, but the eyes above his plump blue cheeks showed a disturbing intelligence and his frequent laughter seemed perfunctory. Berry was younger than the others; his sandy hair was cut so short that it stood up like the bristles of a hairbrush.

"Bit of a comedown," he was saying. "Not so much hobnobbing with officers now that we've joined the unwashed O.R." He glanced slyly at the Major. Everyone laughed except Captain Bolton, who merely smiled faintly. O'Neill, red with mirth, laughed louder than anyone.

Captain Bolton's eyes moved from one or other of the lieutenants to the Major in a detached, incurious way. There was something about his powerful jaw that was familiar to the Major; it was a moment before he realized what it was. These were the strong regular features (a face without any particular identity) which he had observed that sculptors frequently chose for war memorials. He could easily imagine Bolton frozen in bronze into some heroic posture. Put a helmet on his head, a bronze flag in his hand, drape a few dying bronze comrades around his knees...But Captain Bolton was very much alive and proved it by saying to the barman in a mild tone:

"Another round quick sharp, Paddy, you dirty Shinner, and put it on our account..."

"And send it to the King," added Pike. "If he won't pay send it to the Lord of Wipers."

O'Neill explained the reason for introducing the Major to them: namely, the fact that they were neighbours. The Major too lived under Edward Spencer's roof at the Majestic.

"Spencer has two lovely daughters," Foster-Smith said, showing no interest in O'Neill's information.

"I've got a lovely daughter too," offered O'Neill winking broadly. "Want to see her picture?" And after a moment's fumbling he produced a tattered photograph of Viola. While "the men from the trenches" were studying it O'Neill winked again, this time at the Major. The Major turned away. As he was leaving Bolton

called after him: “Tell the old grannies that the next one we catch we’ll cut her up in pieces and put her in a sack.”

Laughter echoed after him as he made his way through the empty changing-room towards the lounge. Before he reached it O’Neill, who had hurried after him, took him by the arm and asked eagerly: “What d’you think of them? They’ll give the Shinners something to think about, won’t they?”

“I’m sure they will,” the Major said coldly. “But the cure may be as bad as the disease.”

When O’Neill had departed the Major wearily climbed the stairs to the tea-room on the first floor. It was empty at this hour, but there was a veranda with a splendid view over the links and beyond to the cornfields that lined the road to Valebridge. The sun was already low in the sky and black shadows crept far out into the flowing grass. Down below, by the club-house steps, four late arrivals were preparing to set out for the first tee, the breeze ballooning their plus-fours as they waited. There would still be time this evening for nine holes, or eighteen if one was not too particular about the fading light.

As they moved away from the club-house a great number of ragged men and boys materialized around them raising a piercing, pitiful clamour. Some of these tattered figures were so old and bent that they could scarcely hobble forward to press their claims, others mere boys who were scarcely bigger than the golf-bags they were hoping to carry. The golfers looked them over and made their selection. Those who had been rejected retired disconsolately to the shadows where they had been lurking. There was little hope now that another party would set out that evening.

The Major sighed, stretched, yawned and presently went home, disturbed that old men and children should have to hang around the club-house until late at night in the hope of earning a sixpence. He thought: “Really, something should be done about it.” But what could one do?

* * *

STATE OF IRELAND

A Conspiracy Against England

On the motion for the adjournment of the House of Commons yesterday, Sir Edward Carson said that he could not help thinking that the English and Scottish people—he hoped he was wrong—had begun not to care a spark what happened in Ireland. He imagined that a few years ago they could not have seen policemen serving their King shot down like dogs from day to day and soldiers who had fought their battles returning home to be treated like criminals because they had performed their heroic duties with very little being done for their protection. It was difficult to understand the paralysis that had come over the people of England in relation to these crimes. There was ample evidence that what was going on in Ireland was connected with what was going on in Egypt and India. It was all part of a scheme, openly stated, to reduce Great Britain to the single territory she occupied here, and to take from her all the keys of a great Empire. They would find, if they looked into it, that the same American-Irish who were working this matter in Ireland, and who visited Ireland last year, had an Irish Office, an Egyptian Office, and an Indian Office in New York. It was well known. It had been stated in the American papers that there was this great conspiracy going on—of which Sinn Fein formed only a part—not out of love for Ireland but out of hatred for Great Britain, fanned by Germans everywhere... He believed that the whole of this murder campaign, or a great part of it, was directed from America, and he believed the funds largely came from there.

* * *

GIRL’S HAIR CUT OFF

A New Way to Free Ireland

The outrage near Tuam when the hair was cut off Bridget Keegan by masked men who entered her father’s house in the early hours of the morning was strongly condemned by magistrates.

Mr Golding, C.S., who appeared for the Crown said it was a blackguardly act. Seven men entered the girl’s house about a quarter to one in the morning. One of them had a revolver and the others had what looked like revolvers. They took the girl, who had fainted, in her nightdress out to the yard, and cut her hair off with a shears, telling her sister, whom they threatened with the same fate, that that was what she got for going with Tommies. While the man with the shears was cutting off the hair he sang: “We are all out for Ireland free.”

All I can say is, said Mr Golding, God help Ireland if these are the acts of Irishmen, and God help Ireland if these are the men to free her.

* * *

LAND AGITATION MAINTAINED

Roman Catholic Bishop's Appeal

The Most Rev. Dr O'Dea, Roman Catholic Bishop of Galway, preaching at Killanin, where he administered Confirmation, entreated the people to be calm and united, and above all to do everything in accordance with the rules of justice laid down by the Church, and the precepts of honesty which the Commandments require. With regard to shootings and outrages he would say little. Shootings were always dangerous, and even if shots were fired without any attempts to kill or wound, were they not threats? Did not the shots fired in the air threaten, and was not a threat sinful?

With regard to the taking over of land, continued his lordship, all I shall say is this: Let not the love of land, or riches, or anything else in this world, make us break God's law, for land stained with God's blood is unlawfully got, and is branded with God's curse.

* * *

A day or two after the Major's visit to the Golf Club Edward assembled his staff and what remained of his family to make an important announcement. The Major was also present, as were a number of the old ladies. Indeed, certain of the old ladies (particularly the Misses Bagley, Archer and Porteous) had lived at the Majestic for so long and in such penurious circumstances that somehow, since Edward no longer felt able to bring up the subject of payment of bills with them, they had metamorphosed themselves into members of the family. This situation was unsatisfactory for Edward who himself was no longer as wealthy as he had been. But one cannot turn a gentlewoman out into the streets to beg for her living. Besides, he found any discussion of money distasteful. As for baldly asking a lady to pay her bill, he would as soon have committed sodomy. His only resource, as the Major saw straight away, was to make their life so unpleasant that they might want to leave of their own accord. But naturally he was too much of a gentleman to do this deliberately, even though his expenses never seemed to stop mounting. In these circumstances it was probably a good thing that even at the best of times the discomfort of living at the Majestic was close to intolerable.

Edward's gaze wandered absently around the room while he waited for everyone to assemble. Presently he stifled a yawn; he did not in the least look like someone about to make an important announcement. When at last a hush fell on the room he cleared his throat. He just wanted to say, he said, that he was on the point of—he paused a moment to let his words sink in—on the point of beginning an economy drive.

An "economy drive"? The old ladies flashed inquiring glances at each other, as if to say that *they* had been under the impression that this economy drive had already begun, indeed that it had already been going on for rather a long time. Some of the servants too betrayed signs of alarm: was this the end of their employment? So many people were out of work these days that it seemed more than likely that one day their turn would come. The cook, who had a houseful of drunken relations to support in one of the Dublin slums, gasped inaudibly; the massive façade of her bosom began to rise and fall rapidly. Evans turned pale and the boils on his neck glowed like cherries above the worn fringe of his stiff collar. Only one or two of the youngest maids who had barely arrived "from the country" blushed shyly and smiled their acceptance, as they would have even if Edward had decreed that they were to be whipped. As for Murphy, hitherto frozen into a cast-iron lethargy, his eyes were now racing to and fro across the carpet like terrified mice.

Edward cleared his throat. They expected him to continue, to amplify and explain...but no, he said nothing. The heavy ticking of the grandfather clock became audible. At length he sighed and asked: were there any questions?

Well, no, there were not. The air of dissatisfaction in the room deepened, however, and Miss Bagley looked quite cross. One really did not know where to begin with one's ques-tions when such an outlandish idea as an "economy drive" was proposed. In the old days...Silence had fallen again. It was interrupted by old Mrs Rappaport, who was sitting straight-backed as ever in a rocking-chair by the empty fire-place, a lace cap pinned on her thin grey hair. She began to rock herself peevishly back and forth, faster and faster, until at last she cried: "It's scandalous!" and everyone brightened a little.

But with Granny Rappaport one could never be quite sure whether she had altogether pinned down the subject under discussion or was talking about something totally different. Edward chose to ignore her and said that, all right then, that was all he had wanted to say and, by the way, thanked them for their co-operation. So they were dismissed...and still did not know at whose hard-won comforts the thin rats of economy were about to begin gnawing.

Edward, of course, was the sort of person for whom words and deeds are the same. Perhaps, the Major reflected, he would consider it sufficient to announce the economy drive without actually putting it into practice. That afternoon, however, while Edward and the Major were taking an after-lunch stroll on the terrace outside the ballroom, the twins were noticed fishing in the swimming-pool with an old tennis racket. They were brusquely summoned.

"Stand here and let's see how tall you are. Oh, stand up straight, girl! D'you need clothes?"

"Yes, Daddy. Ours are all in flitters, mine especially."

"Mine are worse."

"Mine are ten times, twenty times, a hundred times—" Charity held up the darned elbow of her cardigan —"a million million times worse."

"How long have you had the clothes you've got?"

"Absolutely *ages.*"

"A billion years."

"All right then, follow me. You come too, Major, and see fair play."

Edward turned in through the grimy desert of the ball-room and they followed him across it and up an unfamiliar staircase, seldom used, to judge by the spiders' webs which garnished the banister. As they climbed the twins pestered Edward with questions: what were these clothes? Had he been to Dublin to the shops? Was it Switzer's, or Pim's, or Brown Thomas's, or what was it? How did he know their size and did he realize that Faith was a bit bigger in her bosom? Edward made no reply; he was short of breath and flushed. As they struck off down a corridor he murmured to the Major: "Getting old. Must take it easy these days."

The twins had run ahead; every step they took raised a puff of dust from the carpet, so that their footprints appeared like smoke, glittering in the stripes of afternoon sunlight that filtered through half-open doors. Underfoot loose floorboards creaked and shifted ominously.

"If I get dry rot I'm done for," Edward continued as if still discussing his health.

"Oh?"

"Bally place'll fall about m'ears."

One hundred and twenty-one, one hundred and twenty-two, one hundred and twenty-three...The next room had no brass number screwed to the door but once there had been one; its darker shadow remained on the varnished wood. It was at this door that Edward halted. He took a key from his pocket and unlocked it.

"In *there*?" exclaimed Charity, mystified. It was dark inside. Edward crossed to the window and threw open the closed shutters. Abruptly everything took on shape, colour and meaning. Although he had never been here before, everything he saw was perfectly familiar to the Major. He knew whose room this had been. His heart sank.

The twins had not been in here before. The room seemed to be occupied. They peered around curiously but already their excitement was melting into suspicion. They looked at the unmade bed, sheets and eiderdown roughly pulled up as if the chambermaid had not had time to make it properly. They wrinkled their noses at the pitcher and bowl, the sponge dried as hard as the pumice-stone beside it. They eyed their lovely reflections in the mirror and looked at the dressing-table with its silver hairbrushes and the silver frame containing a photograph of, well...the truth had dawned on them now but for a moment they were speechless with disbelief.

"Now let's see...where...?" Edward said quietly. As he spoke the Major glimpsed a shadow of pain, as if he had been hurt behind the eyes (but why did he have to bring *me*? he wondered bitterly). Edward stepped over to the wardrobe and opened it experimentally. It was empty. A large white moth flew wearily out for a little way until it vanished from the air under a vicious downward smash of Faith's tennis racket. A puff of powder from its wings hung in the room.

"Daddy, how *could* you?" cried Charity. "You surely don't mean us to wear *Angela's* things!" Edward said nothing, but his face darkened as he turned away and looked round the room. His eye came to rest on a chest of dark polished oak which, to the Major's excited imagination, looked remarkably like a coffin. In fact it was an old dower chest which had probably belonged to the Spencers for generations. Edward had dug up the old metal clasp and lifted the lid; inside it was lined with another kind of wood, lighter and fragrant, cedar-wood perhaps. Another lid was lifted. In a moment Edward was scooping piles of neatly folded clothing on to the carpet.

"We *can't,* Daddy, it's too creepy," insisted Faith, wiping the strings of the tennis racket on the bedclothes to clean off the minced remains of the moth.

"Not a *corpse's* clothes," pleaded Charity. "It's awful. Just the thought of it makes me feel funny."

"We must save money, my dear. Now be a good girl and take your dress off so we can try them on. If they don't fit we'll have to get the cook to work with her needle and thread—they tell me she's very handy at that sort of thing. Besides, you'd do well to take a few lessons from her while you have the chance since you don't seem to have learned much at school...One of these days you'll have homes of your own and maybe, I don't know, the way things are going you'll not always have servants to look after you...in any case," he added weakly, "a bit of sewing never did anyone any harm."

"I think I'm going to faint," Faith said grimly and sat down heavily on the bed, making its springs creak.

"Ugh! That's the corpse's death-bed you're sitting on, Faithy."

"You'll speak of Angela with respect," snapped Edward, "or you'll both get a hiding and be sent to your rooms."

"Why *me*? It was Catty that said it," Faith said grumpily. "And what's more I *am* feeling sick and will probably start spewing any moment."

"Faith, don't be dis*gus*ting," Charity said, grinning in spite of herself. "You've started me feeling peculiar too."

"Shut up, both of you, and pick one of these dresses before I lose my patience. They're as good as new and some of them were never worn."

"Which ones?" asked Faith dubiously, poking at the heap of clothing with her tennis racket.

The Major had lit his pipe and was watching the twins as they rummaged in the pile of clothing, holding

dresses up to see what they looked like. It was clear (one of the countless things the Major had never known about her) that Angela had dressed extravagantly. Almost all her dresses had tucks in descending horizontal tiers; there was a heavy afternoon dress of velvet embossed with chrysanthemums which reached to the ground and trailed in a swallow-tail behind; there were heavy woollen dresses with overdresses, all with a great deal of frogging and embroidery; there was a blue satin evening dress with a band of black velvet that trailed as a sash behind; there was a dress of black taffeta or chiné silk with a vast amount of braid; and there was a moleskin cape and muff.

"It's all so horribly old-lady!"

"Come on, we haven't got all day," Edward told them. "Make up your minds. If you don't pick one of these dresses each within thirty seconds I'll pick them for you."

Under this threat the twins reluctantly made their selections: Charity a simple blue linen morning dress with a white organdie collar, Faith a silk jersey afternoon dress with a belt of gold cord and tassels to the ankles.

"I feel a bit sick, Daddy..."

But Edward's patience was now clearly at an end and the twins retired sullenly to change.

Slumped in an armchair, the Major was wondering whether he might ask Edward for the photograph of himself which stood on the dressing-table (a picture taken in Brighton in 1916 showing a relatively carefree youth who bore little resemblance to the stoically grim head which these days accompanied him to the mirror). He wanted this picture merely to remove it from the room, from the neighbouring hairbrushes and other relics, to destroy it...he did not know why he wanted to do this. In any case, he was afraid that Edward might look askance at such a request.

Edward was kneeling among the bundles of clothing and rummaging through them abstractedly.

"Poor Angie! There's lots more somewhere: petticoats and knickers and corsets and so forth...she liked clothes, used to buy things nobody'd ever wear out here in the country."

He held up a dress of black velvet that billowed emptily in his hands, empty of Angela.

"Wore this the day she was presented at the Viceregal Lodge. For a joke we went out to Phoenix Park on the tram instead of hiring a carriage, both of us dressed up like dog's dinners. How people stared at us! Bit of fun we had, you know, pretending to be Socialists. Angie said she was ashamed to be seen arriving on the tram, but she laughed about it afterwards like a good sport." He stood up and went to stare at himself moodily in the mirror, picking up one of the silver brushes (tarnished blue-grey by months of neglect) and rubbing his thumb over the bristles.

"They're only kids and it doesn't really matter what they wear so long as it keeps them warm," he added defensively. "Got to get hold of a bit of spare cash one way or another if I'm to give that blighter Ripon a helping hand."

"Is that the reason?"

"Well, you said yourself that with a wife to support he'd be needing some cash to set himself up."

The Major could remember saying no such thing but could see no point in denying it.

"But don't you think his wife will have something?"

"I doubt it. Anyway, Ripon's not the sort to accept charity, whatever his faults. In some ways, you know, he's a chip off the old block. I suppose I should sell off these brushes and things as well. They're not much good to poor Angie now. These trinkets might fetch something. Hate to do it, though."

They lapsed into a lugubrious silence. Presently, with a sigh, Edward began: "You know, the one time in my life when I was really happy..." But at this moment the twins entered.

"My! Don't they look smart?" cried Edward in genuine admiration. "Well, what d'you think of that, Brendan? Aren't they lovely?"

The Major had to agree with him. The twins looked more lovely than ever standing there, identical, outraged, each holding up her skirts in small clenched fists. They uttered a simultaneous gasp.

"But we look like *freaks,* Daddy!"

"We can't wear things like this. People will laugh themselves sick at us."

"Nonsense, you look absolutely charming, you can take it from me. Young ladies knew how to dress themselves before the war."

"Daddy, you surely don't want us to look like freaks," pleaded Faith, close to tears.

"That's going too far! I refuse, I simply refuse!"

"Faith, I warned you! Charity! You'll go to your rooms this instant," shouted Edward, losing his temper. His anger impressed the twins sufficiently to quell them. They glared at him tearfully for a moment and then stamped out.

The soft-hearted Major hurried out after them and handed each a bar of chocolate (he had recently taken to carrying chocolate in his pockets to give to the ragged, famished children he encountered on his walks). They looked at the chocolate, sniffed, but finally accepted it.

The following day the Major came upon the twins in a deserted sitting-room sifting through a mountain of hats, muffs, boas and shoes. The hats were hopelessly lush and exotic, they told him peevishly. Who could possibly wear such things?

"Look at this!" Faith showed him a broad-brimmed felt hat swathed in yards of orange satin with a bird

clinging to the back.

"Or this, it looks like a whole farmyard," she said, throwing him another hat of black leghorn trimmed with a jungle of osprey feathers and real oats. They appeared to be mollified, however, by the boas; indeed, the Major found himself having to adjudicate a squabble that developed over a magnificent boa of magenta cock feathers. It went to Charity on the understanding that Faith should have first claim over a matching hat, tippet and muff of peacock feathers (the muff even had a beak and brown glass eyes on the alert), together with first choice of the silk parasols. Finally, the twins made another discovery: Angela's shoes fitted them to perfection! Unfortunately, however, old Mrs Rappaport happened to hear about the shoes and caused a dreadful scene. They must wear their button boots up to their calves for the sake of their ankles! Otherwise they would look like milkmaids when they grew up. The old lady achieved the support of Edward in this matter (although, to tell the truth, he was losing interest in the twins' clothing) and shoes were forbidden. The twins became spiteful and for days refused to go near their grandmother. But presently all was forgotten and nobody (except the Major) seemed to notice that they had gone back to wearing Angela's shoes. Certainly no one thought of mentioning the fact to old Mrs Rappaport.

This incident marked the beginning and also, really, the end of Edward's economy drive. The simple truth was that the old ladies were right: it was as if an economy drive had already been in operation. There was nothing much left to economize *on*. True, one could sack a few servants, but they were paid so little anyway it hardly seemed worth while. Besides, the place was already in a scarcely habitable state. If, into the bargain, the servants were sacked what would it be like? Well, probably, not much different, as a matter of fact, because the problem of keeping the place clean had long since gone beyond the point where Murphy and the blushing young girls "up from the country" could make a significant impact on it, even if they had wanted to (which they did not, particularly).

Murphy had been behaving oddly of late. At Edward's meeting he had shown signs of abject terror lest his meagre income be stifled by the proposed economies. But now there came to the Major's ears one or two extraordinary rumours about the aged manservant's truculent behaviour; rumours, of course, which anyone who had set eyes on the chap could scarcely credit.

According to a story circulated by Miss Staveley, one of the oldest and deafest but not least talkative ladies in the hotel, Murphy had been asked to assist her up the stairs to her room on the first floor where she had the feeling she might find her pince-nez. The impudent old rascal was reported to have told her bluntly that she would do better to stay where she was...before padding away down some lonely corridor with a wheezing chuckle. Unable to believe her ears (she was distinctly hard of hearing, it was true) she had waited for him to come back. But there had been no sign of him. He had disappeared into the dim recesses of the interior and it was hopeless to look for him (nobody, not even the twins, not even Edward himself, knew the geography of that immense rambling building better than Murphy who had spent his life in it). She had not set eyes on him again for two days, by which time she had found her pince-nez in her sewing basket and lost them again (this time the Major was conscripted to help in the search and found them on the nose of the statue of Venus in the foyer). This rumour reached Edward who rebuked Murphy. But Murphy denied all knowledge of the affair and clearly did not know what pince-nez were; he seemed to have a vague idea that they were a reprehensible form of underwear worn by foreign ladies. One just had to give the fellow the benefit of the doubt and, besides, Miss Staveley... Edward tapped his forehead and rolled his eyes.

But whatever one might say about Miss Staveley one was obliged to add that she paid her bills regularly. This made her a person of consequence among the guests at the Majestic. However confused her apprehension of the world around her might seem at times, she was always listened to with respect. Another rumour, promoted this time by Mr Norton, the mathematical "genius," had it that Murphy was well known for speaking seditiously in public houses. Miss Johnston remarked despondently: "No doubt we shall all be murdered in our beds by the wretched man," but scarcely anyone took Murphy to be a serious menace, even full of whiskey and Bolshevism as he was reported to be. Nevertheless the old ladies and the Major agreed that it was a sign of the times. And what terrible times they were! At no point in recent history, reflected the Major (who was slumped in an armchair in an agreeable after-lunch torpor), at no point in the past two or three hundred years could the standards of decent people have been so threatened, could civilization have been so vulnerable and near to disintegration, as they were today. One just had to open the newspaper...

Another sign of the times was the derelict state of the fields that lay around the Majestic. Not planted in the spring because of Edward's quarrel with the farm-workers, they now wore a thick green fur of weeds. The Major sometimes saw tattered children dragging aimlessly through these fields in a doleful search for something edible: a little corn that had seeded itself from last year's harvest or a stray potato plant. Edward too seemed oppressed by this sight and although he said: "It's their own damned fault. I told the silly beggars what would happen if they didn't plant those fields," he made no move to have the children chased away and even one day sent Seán Murphy out with a washing-tub full of windfalls from the orchard. The children fled, of course, at the sight of him and he was obliged to leave the tub there in the middle of the field. When he went back for it half an hour later it was empty.

"I sometimes wonder," mused the Major, "what would happen if one caught one of those little brats young enough, taught him how to behave, sent him to a decent public school and so on. D'you suppose one could tell the difference between him and the son of a gentleman?"

“You might just as well dress up a monkey in a suit of clothes,” replied Edward shortly.

* * *

AMRITSAR

The findings of the Hunter Commission in regard to the disturbances in the Punjab in the spring of last year were issued last night as a Blue Book...General Dyer’s career as a soldier is over. All the members admit that firing was necessary. Even the Indians recognize that the riots could not have been quelled by any other means. They condemn General Dyer, however, in the first place, for firing without warning, and, in the next place, for continuing to fire when the necessity for drastic action had disappeared...Six months after an event it is very easy to weigh its circumstances in a deli-cate balance and to apportion approval and blame. No doubt, General Dyer acted rashly; but he probably had about two minutes in which to make up his mind. He was confronted with a fanatical Oriental mob, fired with anti-European frenzy. He knew that hundreds of white women and girls were dependent on him for their safety. Rightly or wrongly, he believed that the fate of India was at stake. Therefore, he gave the order to fire. We quite agree that he went beyond his brief. The “crawling” order was merely stupid. General Dyer was neither a politician nor a moralist. He was a soldier and, moreover, an Anglo-Indian. He thought of the *memsahib* who had been assaulted, and in India the *memsahib* is sacrosanct. The Hunter Report will have far-reaching consequences in India. We are not at all certain that they will lighten the task of the Indian Government. General Dyer’s condemnation, although inevitable and strictly correct, will be remembered in India when his unfortunate decision has been long forgotten.

* * *

NIGHT OF TERROR IN DERRY

Fierce Fighting in the Streets

Armed parties of Unionists and Sinn Feiners took possession of some of the streets and rifle and revolver fire was almost continuous during the greater part of the night. Our Londonderry Correspondent, telegraphing last night, says: “The fiercest and most fatal rioting of modern times in Londonderry occurred on Saturday night when several people were killed and many wounded. A state of the greatest terrorism prevailed throughout the night. On Sunday morning looting took place on an extensive scale and there were instances of actual and attempted incendiarism.”

* * *

CONNAUGHT RANGERS IN INDIA

A Reuter’s Simla message states that three-quarters of the men of the Connaught Rangers at Jullundar refused duty and laid down their arms upon receipt of a mail giving news of Irish events...

The detachment at Jutogh, six miles from Simla, is perfectly quiet. The whole affair is regarded as being entirely due to political causes and the Sinn Fein agitation.

* * *

In Kilnalough, as elsewhere in Ireland, it rained all that July. The farmhouses were now empty except for two or three old men, the rest of the workers having decamped after their abortive attempt to induce Edward with threats to hand over ownership. It was no doubt thanks to the fact that a contingent of Auxiliary Police were billeted at the Majestic that Edward escaped without harassment or injury. Other landowners in various parts of the country were prudently giving in to the demands made upon them at that time, but Edward remained inflexible and contemptuous. Given the state of the country and the frequency of terrorist attacks, any vindictive farm-labourer with a gun might have shot Edward down with impunity. In the meantime, however (provided he could find men willing to harvest them for him), Edward still had two meagre fields of slowly ripening corn.

The Major could see both of these fields from the window of his room; they lay one on each side of a gently sloping valley, separated only by a rutted cart-track that swept round by the farm and on to join the road to Kilnalough. Pale green at the beginning of August, the corn seemed to grow a little more blonde morning by morning. He had brought with him a pair of excellent field-glasses, made in Germany, which he had removed from the massive punctured chest of an apoplectic Prussian officer with waxed moustaches whom he had come upon lying upside down in a shell-crater. Every morning he used these glasses to scan the countryside and derived a particular pleasure from examining the shining, iridescent surface of the corn as it flowed this way or that along the valley in waves of syrup.

“Strange,” he thought one morning. “How did that get there?” A large boulder which he had never noticed

before had appeared at the edge of one of the fields. Why should anyone go to the trouble of carting an extremely heavy boulder to the edge of a cornfield? He decided to take a walk over there later in the day.

But immediately after lunch the twins pounced on him. They wanted him to “be the man” while they practised some new dance steps; in particular, it seemed, they were anxious to learn “The Joy Trot” and “The Vampire.” They had succeeded in borrowing a gramophone and some new records from old Mr Norton, whose relentless pursuit of youth was truly amazing when one considered his physical decrepitude. At first Mr Norton had demanded that he should “be the man” in return for the use of his gramophone. But the twins were unenthusiastic. Besides, it was found that the rhythm was too lively for his arthritic joints and the twins absolutely refused to dance at half-speed as he proposed. Somewhat disgruntled, he settled for a “squeeze.” Each twin in turn was given a hug that squeezed a groan of air out of her, while the Major frowned and puffed at his pipe, wondering whether he shouldn’t intervene. But at last Mr Norton let them go and sat down gloomily to watch the Major’s clumsy efforts to do as the twins told him. For unfortunately the Major was a very poor dancer and found new steps difficult to acquire. Not that there was anything particularly difficult about the one-step or the foxtrot—they were remarkably like walking; the difficulty lay in matching his movements to those of his partner. He also sometimes had trouble turning corners.

“Not with your pipe,” said Faith, seizing it from his lips and taking it away while Charity busied herself with winding up the gramophone. “Now, hold me tighter for heaven’s sake.”

“Hm, I told you I wasn’t frightfully good at this sort of thing,” murmured the Major, discountenanced by the removal of his pipe. “Now let me get this straight...”

“Forward with your *right* foot!”

“Ah...”

“Dear God!”

“Sorry, I got mixed up.”

“You’d better let *me* lead. Now just listen to the rhythm and don’t bother to look at your feet...Oh, you’re perfectly hopeless!”

But the Major, although he was aware that music was being played, was at first deafened by the scraping of his own feet on the grimy floor of the ballroom and listened in vain for some sign which would tell him when to make his movements. He had started off with one softly yielding hand in his own horny palm and another resting like thistledown on his shoulder; but in no time at all he was being towed, pushed and dragged without ceremony this way and that, first by one twin, then by the other. For such slender, delicate creatures they were really amazingly strong: when Charity spilled a box of gramophone needles and dived under the piano to pick them up the Major involuntarily glimpsed the back of her smooth, firmly muscled thighs and (while fox-trotting swiftly forward to block this disturbing sight from Mr Norton’s avid gaze) found himself thinking that, physically at least, one could hardly still call her a child.

By now the Major was beginning to warm up and get the hang of things and did not need so much pulling and pushing. They changed the record to “By the Silver Sea” and while he had a rest the girls danced together most prettily, taking it in turns to be the man.

“The little darlings,” whispered Mr Norton hoarsely to the Major who had sat down beside him. “Butter wouldn’t melt in their mouths.”

The Major too was watching them with admiration as they spun round whirling their skirts and shaking their ankles in the air and doing all sorts of amusing and fanciful things without ever losing the rhythm or getting in each other’s way. With the exertion (the Major changed the needle and wound up the gramophone as quickly as he could, so that they would not stop this enjoyable display) they gradually became flushed and flirtatious. Their eyes sparkled. They flashed lingering smiles at the Major as they danced round. They licked their lips with delightful pink tongues and demurely lowered their lashes over moist, shining eyes. Dimples appeared in their cheeks and their teeth had never glistened more pearly white. “How perfectly charming they are,” thought the Major, “as they try out their attractions on me—though not in the least seriously—like young birds learning how to fly: the same attractions that one day they’ll use on the young men whose hearts they choose to break...How charming!” But a glance at Mr Norton’s puckered walnut face told him that the old rascal obviously considered that *he* was the target for the lingering smiles and licked lips and lowered lashes. He was returning the smiles with a roguish one of his own, a peeling back of the lips to exhibit unusually large yellow false teeth. The man was truly amazing. Really, one almost had to admire him for the tenacity with which he held on to the remnants of his youth.

Once more it was the Major’s turn. Dancing could really be quite enjoyable, he decided, and one girl melted into another so smoothly from one record to the next that he had trouble remembering which twin he was dancing with. It came as something of a shock when he realized that Mr Norton had fallen asleep on his chair (worn out by the sexual electricity in the air) and that the time was five o’clock and that he himself was exhausted.

“Just one more!” cried the twins, but the Major said no, he hadn’t realized the time, and picking up his pipe made for the door, ignoring their entreaties. It was only later, while he was thirstily drinking a cup of tea in the company of Miss Bagley and Miss Porteous, that he remembered the curious boulder which had appeared from nowhere at the edge of the cornfield. By that time it was too late to walk over and have a look at it. If it turned out to be still there—he fancied it might disappear as magically as it had arrived—he would go

tomorrow. Having made this decision, he put the matter out of his mind in order to give his full attention to Miss Bagley and Miss Porteous, who already seemed to have discovered how he had spent the afternoon. Yes, he agreed, the younger generation's love of dancing might well be one of the reasons for their disrespect for their elders; on the other hand, it was all in good fun, they really meant no harm by it. It was all very harmless. Yes, he would like another cup of tea, he had a "terrible thirst on him," as the Irish would say.

He was still in pyjamas the following morning when he removed the German field-glasses from the cardboard box in which he carried them (the Prussian officer had inconsiderately bled all over the original velvet-lined leather case) and raised them to his eyes. The boulder was still there, of course, lying beside the waving ears of corn. He had not really expected to find it gone. But it had now been joined by another and much more startling object. The Major adjusted the focus of the glasses to make sure that it really was, yes—but how could it possibly be?—a tree stump, the stump of a tree, which quite positively had not been there yesterday, neither tree nor stump. But there it was, as large as life, beside the densely packed corn.

When he had finished dressing he went downstairs, but he was too early. Edward and the rest of the household had not yet even begun their breakfast; morning prayers were still being said. Outside the breakfast room the Major listened with a faint smile as Edward began to recite the list of things for which on this morning of 1920 one should give thanks to God. He lingered for a moment, leaning against the cold stone wall of the corridor and thinking that Edward's voice sounded tired and disabused. And over the last few months the list seemed to have grown shorter. Edward's voice ceased. Now he would be moving to the War Memorial to open the hinged leaves. Still smiling, the Major tiptoed away; the ranks of tiny accusing eyes would once more look for him in vain. Moreover, he would be first with the *Irish Times* and would not have to wait his turn through the long morning while the old ladies pored over the "Births and Deaths" column to see which of their contemporaries they had managed to survive.

When he saw Edward later in the morning he said: "I suppose you know there's a clandestine harvest going on."

To his surprise Edward nodded gloomily. "I thought as much, but I wasn't sure. Now I shall have to do something."

"What will you do?"

"God knows. I shall have to stop them one way or another."

"Why not just let them take it! They must need it badly if they come out to cut it at night."

"That's quite out of the question. It'd never do to let them know that they can get away with stealing my property. The whole bally place would be stripped in two shakes."

"Oh, surely not."

"Look, it's not my fault they cleared off. If they want to follow the wretched Shinners then let the Shinners feed them. Another thing, the corn isn't even properly ripe yet. Any fool can see that."

"I suppose they can't wait," said the Major with a sigh. "Mind you, I agree that it's their own fault."

"Really, Brendan, there's such a thing as law and order, you know. If the country's in such a mess at the moment it's because people like you and I have been slack about letting the blighters get away with it."

"Oh, hang law and order! Two miserable fields of corn which the poor beggars planted themselves anyway. You don't mind letting them go hungry so long as your own pious principles are satisfied."

There was a sudden silence. The Major was as surprised at his outburst as Edward. Edward flushed but said nothing.

He must have brooded about the matter, however, because after lunch he took the Major aside and told him that he would try to make arrangements to have it harvested and milled by people in Kilnalough and then distributed to the people round about who most needed it. He would also make sure that Dr Ryan and the parish priest heard of his intentions, so that they could warn the people to leave the corn alone until it was ripe. That way they wouldn't be obliged to break the law, nor would his own "pious principles" (he smiled wryly) be offended. He had already sent Murphy into Kilnalough with the news.

For some time the Major had been impermeable to the rumours that circulated in the Majestic, having had his fill of them in the damp of the trenches where they grew like mushrooms. But now he found himself listening again, since the old ladies gobbled them up greedily and loved to share them with him (it was a mystery where they originated unless they were somehow generated by the revolutionary sentiments said to be bubbling in Murphy's brain). The I.R.A. had planned to assassinate His Majesty, Miss Archer (no relation) assured him one day, with a dart tipped with curare fired from a blow-pipe by some form of savage imported specially from the jungles of Brazil.

"Oh, what nonsense!" the Major chaffed her (she was one of his favourites). "I'm surprised at you, Sybil, for believing such a cock-and-bull story."

"But it's perfectly true. I have it on the best authority."

"Oh *really*!"

Miss Archer lowered her voice. "D.C."

"D.C.?"

She clicked her tongue, despairing of the Major's power to comprehend. "Dublin Castle."

"Absolute rot," laughed the Major.

But no, Miss Archer insisted that it was nothing less than the truth. And that wasn't the half of it...Not only

had the I.R.A. planned this dastardly act, they had come within a whisker of carrying it out. The Brazilian savage, wearing his own feathers and disguised as a tipster, had been placed beside the course at Ascot. As the Royal Carriage swept towards him he had raised his blow-pipe. The King had come nearer and nearer, had drawn level, the savage's cheeks were actually bulging when...he had been taken by a fit of coughing (unused to the climate, he had died of pneumonia two days later), the dart had slithered out of the pipe and stuck harmlessly in the turf! Miss Archer had abandoned the pretence of seriousness and finished her story in a gale of maidenly giggles, her dim, rheumy, once beautiful eyes streaming with tears of laughter, so that the Major no longer knew whether she had ever intended him to take it seriously. Perhaps she no longer knew herself.

"I shall never believe another word you say," the Major told her sternly.

There was another rumour believed by old Mrs Rice and the Misses Johnston, Laverty and Bagley (and at least half believed by the other ladies) to the effect that all the I.R.A. leaders spoke fluent German and that those mad women (Maud Gonne and the Gore-Booth girl who had married the man with the unpronounceable name) had both been mistresses of the Kaiser. As a supplement, Mr Norton indicated *sotto voce* to the Major that poor old Kaiser Bill had found them insatiable and had permanently impaired his health in an effort to uphold his honour.

Miss Staveley, as befitted her status at the Majestic, had a rumour vended and believed exclusively by herself but which nevertheless chilled for a moment any old lady who heard it: a scheme was afoot whereby every butcher in the country, whether pork or beef, would rise as one man and take their cleavers to the local gentry.

Yet the rumour which the Major liked most of all came from no less a person than Edward himself. He had heard, though it was probably "utter bilge," that Dublin Castle's water supply had been deliberately poisoned and the entire Executive laid low with the exception of a handful of the heaviest whiskey drinkers. These latter were desperately trying to conceal the situation while they coped with it. But what could they do? They were in a situation reminiscent of classical tragedy. The very elixir which had saved their lives now had them groping through an impenetrable alcoholic fog. As one cheerful intoxicated manoeuvre followed another, Sinn Fein prepared to strike a mortal blow at Ireland's heart.

"Fatuous," smiled the Major.

"It does seem a shade far-fetched, but one never knows, particularly these days."

Yet if the Major was tempted to smile at some of these rumours he was always sobered quickly enough when he opened the newspaper. Since his return to Kilnalough not a single day had gone by without news of a raid or shooting or terrorist attack somewhere in Ireland. Indeed, these raids had become so numerous that since the end of May only the major disasters found their way into the main columns of the *Irish Times,* the remainder being relegated to a brief numbered list which appeared daily under the heading CATALOGUE OF CRIME or CAMPAIGN OF OUTRAGE.

1. Londonderry City. At 10.50 p.m. on Thursday, while Constables McDonough and Collis were on duty, they were fired at from a revolver, the bullet striking a wall beside where they were standing.

2. On the morning of Wednesday John Niland, Co. Galway, found that during the night the tails had been cut off nine cattle, some two or three inches of the fleshy part having been cut off in each case.

3. At 11.35 p.m. on Thursday three masked men, two of them armed, entered the house of Thomas Flattery, a candidate for the district councillorship, and asked him to sign a paper not to contest the election. He refused. The leader then said: "Go on your knees and make an Act of Contrition." Mr Flattery said: "I am prepared to die." Two raiders kept revolvers pointed at him, a third kept his wife from moving, and a fourth from outside the door said: "Shoot the dog."

4. On Monday, at Ballyhaise, Co. Cavan, a large glass panel was broken in the Protestant church, and a bottle of wine stolen from the vestry.

5. Co. Cavan. Samuel Fife, postman, Cavan district, received the following letter through the post: "Fife, you have escaped the Huns, but should you come to Arvagh your days are numbered. Take this as final and prepare for death. The White Boys."

6. On Wednesday the house of T. Box, Mountbellew, Co. Galway, was fired into. Last week his potato ridges were torn up and destroyed.

7. Co. Mayo. Patrick McAndrew, water bailiff, received a letter: "Death notice. I think it has come to the time of the day when no man will be allowed to save the fish for an English dog. If you do, you are doomed. Rory of the Rivers."

8. Co. Kerry. Sergeant Coghlan received a letter: "You have been a good and diligent servant of the Crown so it is high time to end your gallop. I now advise you not to chance a sin on your soul as the reward we give good and faithful servants is 1–2 oz. of lead dead weight. For the future you are branded as a traitor. Our governor, Sinn Fein, has decided it."

Before getting into bed that night the Major doused the candles and stood for a moment at the window looking out towards the invisible cornfields. In an hour or so, perhaps, men would appear out of the shadows like rodents out of the woodwork, and set to work reaping Edward's corn by the dim, intermittent moonlight.

Perhaps they were already out there. He yawned and got into bed. In a way it was pleasant to fall asleep thinking of the men working out there—silently, a faint swish of reaping sickles, a soft whisper, the muffled creak of a cartwheel. But of course by now they would know that Edward was on to their game and they would not come. It was pleasant, the summer night. A silent gale of sleep blew over the dark countryside, inclining the corn in waves, now this way, now that. He was happy, in spite of everything. Edward had been about to tell him, waiting for the twins to appear wearing Angela's clothes, about the one time in his life that he had been really happy. "I must ask him," the Major told himself as he fell asleep.

The Major was asleep on his back in a stiff military posture, feet together, hands by his sides, dreaming of Sarah. Later he lay on his stomach and for a while was almost conscious. The room was dark but there was a pink glow on the wall opposite the window. He sat up. There was a scraping sound by the dressing-table.

"Who's there?" he whispered.

A match flared and dipped towards the branched candle-stick, lighting first one candle, then the other. It was Edward, haggard, in a dressing-gown.

"Ah!" exclaimed the Major joyfully. "I was just going to ask you something..." He stopped, unable to think what it was.

Edward threw open the window. With his hands on the sill he leaned out. Gradually coming to his senses, the Major sleepily pulled on his bedroom slippers and reached for his dressing-gown. Even before he reached the window he had begun to realize that something was wrong. He had not been asleep long enough; it was too dark for it to be dawn. He stared past Edward's head at the distant lake of flame. The cornfields were blazing furiously on each side of the valley beyond the sloping ridge. All around them the blackness was perfect and impenetrable.

"Did you do this?"

"Don't be a damn fool!"

"But why should *they*?"

"How the devil should I know?"

By now there was nothing to do but watch it burn. It took hardly any time at all.

Now in the Prussian officer's field-glasses there was no waving corn to be seen, only an expanse of blackened earth. Here and there, where the corn had been still a trifle green, the stalks had not burned to the ground but stood up in scabrous rings and patches, making the Major think of the worm-eaten scalps of young boys whom he had seen trailing round the golf-links. "The wanton burning of food," he thought. "As senseless as the plague." Word had spread in the neighbourhood that Edward had burned the crop himself so that the country people should not have it. The Major guiltily remembered that this had been his own first thought and would have liked to make amends, particularly as Edward had taken on his disabused air.

"Naturally everyone thinks me capable of burning my own crops," he said wryly to the Major. "Why, I'll burn the blessed house down out of spite one of these days, I shouldn't be surprised." And he went off chortling grimly.

But if Edward had not set fire to the field, who had? Surely not the peasants themselves, they needed the corn too badly.

"Brendan, you're not listening!"

"Yes, I am. I've heard every word you said. It's about a bathing-costume."

And still, it could have been an accident, a dropped match, perhaps, or a smouldering cigarette. Or perhaps it was one of those spontaneous fires that sometimes occur in hot weather, a fragment of broken glass catching the rays of the sun, or some such thing.

"Brendan, do you understand, we want eightpence. You're not listening again!"

"Yes, I am. What d'you want eightpence for?"

"Oh, how many times have we got to tell you? For the pattern. Read it to him again, and for heaven's sake listen this time!"

"'Bathing-Suit 1149 (a Practical Bathing-Suit). This is a remarkably simple pattern. The knickers are cut in one piece and joined on to a plain bodice, while the overdress is on the lines of a coat-frock, with a back...'"

(In summer such fires are always possible. There had been a spell of warm, dry weather; the earth was brittle and broke into powder underfoot. But the Major did not really believe that it had been caused accidentally. It had started in the middle of the night and no fire was ever generated by the rays of the moon. Edward was convinced that it was the work of the Sinn Feiners, who were anxious to turn the peasants against him. If they became hungry enough they could be persuaded to do anything. It seemed the only realistic explanation.)

"'...with a back, front, short sleeve, and straight stole collar. A plain belt buttoned over in front holds in the fullness round the waist, and gives the suit a neat finishing touch. (To the knee, with shoes and a cap.) Pattern eightpence.'"

"But why tell me all this?"

"Faithy, I swear that I'll kill him if he says that just once more...Because we want eightpence to buy the

blessed pattern with!"

"Certainly," chuckled the Major, fumbling in his pocket. "Why didn't you say so in the first place?"

The Major had not yet managed to divest himself of his peculiar habit of patrolling restlessly from one room to another. Wandering aimlessly one day, he entered the writing-room, which was hardly ever used these days, and had a look round. The walls were panelled in dark oak but partly obscured by vast greyish tapestries depicting hunting scenes. Above the mantelpiece, for example, stretching up to the dim ceiling was an immense doe lying on its side on a table laden with fruit and round loaves of bread. One of the animal's hind legs was twisted up at an angle to the table while in the foreground the graceful head lolled on its long neck. Once scarlet, the blood which dripped picturesquely from the slit white gullet was now as grey as the fruit on the table, as grey as dust. Tables, chairs and desks were distributed here and there in clusters.

A faint sound alerted him. Edward was fast asleep in a cavernous winged armchair of worn leather, his head lolling on one side, mouth open, face collapsed by weariness, by the beginnings of old age and despair. The Major stood there for a long moment in the silent room, appalled to see Edward looking so vulnerable, so disarmed. Then, as he was preparing to tiptoe away, a black shadow slipped from beneath a dusty escritoire and settled itself comfortably in Edward's abandoned lap (for the great army of cats from the Imperial Bar had recently begun to commandeer certain other little-frequented rooms in the Majestic). Edward woke up, saw the Major watching him, muttered: "Fell asleep," and cleared his throat with a long weary hooting sound which might have been the cry of a dying animal. Neither of them could think of anything to say.

Since the burning of the fields the weather had taken a turn for the worse: perhaps this was adversely affecting Edward's spirits. In any case, it was clearly no comfort to him that the burned crop would very likely have been flattened by the rainstorms that howled around the Majestic and left shining puddles on the floor of the ballroom, even if it had escaped the fire. The storms retired to lash and grumble their way over the Irish Sea towards Wales, leaving a steady, interminable downpour that seemed to hang from the sky like a curtain of glass beads.

"Where's my revolver?" demanded Edward one morning of one of the maids, having spent an hour rummaging through various drawers in his study.

"The cook has it, sir. She does have it safe in the press in the kitchen."

"What the devil does she have it for?"

"She does be afraid of the Volunteers."

Edward wasted no time in recovering the weapon—it was covered in floury fingerprints and wrapped in buttered paper —but told nobody what he intended to do with it. As the days passed, the old ladies continued to huddle in shivering groups like nomads round a camp-fire while the Major's breath steamed up one window after another in various parts of the house. From one or other of these windows he would spot Edward stalking down the drive, oblivious of the water that beat heavily on his tweed cap and raised a faint spray from the shoulders of his trench coat. Very often this trench coat sagged heavily on one side and the Major glimpsed the butt of a revolver protruding from the pocket. Once he hurried after Edward with an umbrella, afraid that he might be about to do something foolish. But Edward was simply making his way towards the pistol-range. There the Major saw him standing at the edge of the clearing under the dripping trees, his cheeks scalded purple by the cold deluge, right arm raised stiff and straight to fire at...it was by no means clear what he was firing at, perhaps at a dandelion that grew uncomfortably from a crevice in the lodge wall. The hand on the end of this stiff arm wobbled violently between the explosions, but Edward's face was impassive, dead. A thin needle of water streamed without interruption from the metal eye on the end of the butt. The Major withdrew into the sodden shrubbery and made his way thoughtfully up the drive with the rain drumming on his umbrella.

On the following day, however, the rain came to a stop and gave way to weak intermittent sunshine. The change in weather seemed to improve Edward's spirits, for, as the Major was being dragged off by the twins for a swim, he called out cheerfully from the library window: "Don't let those two little beasts drown you, Brendan."

The two little beasts looked adorable. Their attempts to make practical bathing-suits from the pattern had ended in failure and tantrums of impatience, but by a lucky chance new bathing-suits had been sent to them by a remote aunt in London, a half-sister of Edward's, reputed to be rather "fast" although married to a clergyman. The bathing-costumes she had chosen, certainly, were the most daring the Major had ever seen, sleeveless and with only the most perfunctory of skirts. Hardly had the rain stopped when the twins donned these scanty garments and set out for the strand. The Major himself was a poor swimmer and although he had pulled on a woollen costume borrowed from Edward (Edward being considerably stouter, it hung loosely over the Major's flat stomach) he lacked enthusiasm; besides, he had heard that the water on the coast of Wexford was freezing even on the hottest day of summer. Consequently, he hoped to avoid entering it.

As it turned out, the twins had no serious intention of swimming either. They shrieked as the surf boiled over their ankles. When the Major, who was sitting on a rock and smoking his pipe, commanded them to go deeper they clung to each other and wailed piteously as a wave washed up to their knees. And that was as deep as they would go.

Presently the Major noticed the cadaverous features of Murphy peering down at him from behind an outcrop of rock.

“What is it you want?”

A lady was asking for him up at the house.

“A lady? Who the devil is it?”

But Murphy had already turned away and no doubt considered himself to be out of earshot.

The Major set off across the beach to the gravel path that led to the boat-house and squash court, then turned to climb the steps towards the first terrace. Looking up, he saw that Edward was waiting for him at the very top of the final flight of steps, on a level with the house. And with Edward was Sarah.

The Major brushed the sand from the blue-and-white stripes of his costume and began to run, springing up one flight of steps after another. Edward and Sarah waited motionless as he toiled steadily upwards, the empty bag of cloth (which Edward’s swelling chest and paunch normally filled) flapping in front of him. On one of the lower terraces he overtook Murphy, who was scurrying along with his head down as if he too were in a great hurry. He uttered a gasp of fear when the panting, blue-striped Major suddenly sprang from behind him, taking three stone steps at a time, his bare feet making no noise on the smooth surface. The aged manservant was swiftly left behind to labour up the steps alone—and, indeed, soon vanished altogether along some alternative route.

As the Major reached the last flight of steps, from the top of which Edward and Sarah looked down at him smiling, he slowed to a more dignified pace and thought: “Why am I in such a hurry? Really, she’s only a friend. She’ll think me a silly ass for running all the way.”

He reached the top at last. Edward was saying: “A very dear friend of ours, Brendan, has come to see us...” and he smiled at Sarah with an expression of great warmth and kindness.

“Ouf!” gasped the Major. “I’m out of breath...” And he was silenced again by the need for air.

“It’s nice to be back. How are you, Brendan?”

“Oh, fine, fine.”

“Sarah and Angela used to be great friends, you know,” Edward explained unnecessarily, eyes sadly lowered for a moment to the still heaving, sagging stripes of the Major’s chest. “Angela used to think the world of you, my dear.”

“And I of her,” Sarah said calmly, almost indifferently.

And the Major, while nodding piously to indicate that of course everyone thought the world of everyone, as was only natural, and there need be no doubt in anyone’s mind on that score (he was still flustered from his rapid climb and anxious to agree with everyone), made a rapid and oblique appraisal of her and decided that she looked older and less beautiful. It was a number of months, mind you, since he had last seen her and sometimes a girl in her twenties will change enormously, yes, just from one year to the next, he had often heard it said...something to do with the glands, most likely. Her eyes were still a delightful grey, of course, and her face and hands still attractively sunburned (the Major not being the sort of indoor fellow who likes his ladies lily-white) but her features had a fretful cast; she was probably still weary from travel. What changed her appearance most of all was her hair, which no longer fell freely over her shoulders but was now very neatly secured in a chignon. It was that, more than anything, which made her look older. It made her look like a governess—which was exactly what she had become.

Edward had asked her a polite question about her stay in France (although he already seemed to know all about it) in order to give the Major time to recover his breath, and Sarah was saying that the family had been charming and as for the children, her charges, leaving them had been (the Major listened in vain for a change in her measured, indifferent tone) ...had been heartbreaking. Now it was the Major’s turn to say something and both Edward and Sarah turned to him. But he could hardly express the critical thoughts which had been passing through his mind with regard to Sarah, so he panted artificially a little longer. At last he exclaimed: “I must have left my pipe on the beach,” but then he noticed that his fingers were still curled round a dark wooden object. He stuck it in his mouth and then removed it. Both Sarah and Edward burst out laughing.

Sarah said: “Brendan, you look positively absurd in that bathing-suit.”

Sarah was expected home, she said, and had just looked in for a moment. But she seemed in no great hurry, so the Major went upstairs to wash the sand from his skin and change into more suitable clothes, rubbing macassar oil into his hair and brushing it meticulously smooth. This effort was wasted, however. By the time he went downstairs there was no sign of Sarah. The twins had come up from the beach but they were sulking for some reason and when he asked them if they knew where Sarah was they shrugged their shoulders and said that they hadn’t the faintest. Nor was there any sign of Edward.

He noticed that some of the old ladies were throwing meaning glances in his direction. “What’s the matter with them now?” he wondered irritably. Whatever it was, he had no time for them at the moment. Moreover, he was tired of being considered their protector. Presently, however, he came upon the reason for their meaning glances. Peering into the ladies’ lounge he saw that it was empty except for the broad uniformed back of Captain Bolton. He had his feet up on a sofa and was reading a magazine.

“You may not be aware of the fact, but this room is reserved for ladies.”

Bolton turned slowly. In his hand he held a lady’s lorgnette. He lifted it to his eyes and surveyed the Major for a moment in silence. Then he tossed it aside and turned back to his magazine, saying: “Tell someone to bring me some tea, old boy.”

The Major turned away angrily. There was nothing he could do except find Edward, which was what he

was trying to do already. At last he came upon him in the foyer.

"Where on earth have you been? I've been looking for you everywhere."

"Taking Sarah home. I say, you do look smart, Brendan. Remind me to ask you for the name of your tailor."

"Yes, yes, by all means...The thing is that one of those Auxiliary fellows, the one called Bolton, is upsetting the ladies by sitting in their lounge. I tried to get him to leave but it was no go. Maybe you could have a word with him."

The Major would have accompanied Edward but at this moment one of the maids came to tell him that Miss Porteous was summoning him to the Palm Court. She had been driven out of the ladies' lounge, she told him when he had at last located her amid the foliage, by that awful man. What was it that she wanted? inquired the Major patiently. Oh yes, she wanted two things: one was for him to kill a spider which had been making repeated attempts to climb on to her shoe and was causing her great distress. And the other? She would tell him the other in a minute...wait...she put a small, swollen-jointed wrist to her brow and tried to think what it was.

"I can't see this ravening beast, Miss Porteous, that's been trying to attack you," the Major said, peering on the dusty, shadowy floor. And then, imagining that he had perhaps seen something scurrying away, he murmured, "I see it," and stepped heavily forward, crushing something beneath the sole of his shoe. He made no attempt to examine the remains of his victim. "I suppose that means bad luck for me, doesn't it?"

"Oh dear, I hope not," said Miss Porteous. "I've just thought of what I wanted: someone to help me wind my wool."

A few moments later, as he sat there, hands raised in an attitude of surrender or benediction with the skein of wool diminishing between them, a roar of angry shouting broke out from the direction of the ladies' lounge. It was Edward losing his temper.

Later in the evening a story circulated among the jubilant old ladies to the effect that during his confrontation with Bolton, Edward had threatened to call the police. When Bolton had pointed out that he *was* the police, Edward, outraged, had telephoned to Dublin Castle where he had an influential friend. The matter was being dealt with and it was likely that Bolton would lose his job or, at the very least, be reduced in rank.

There was a curious supplement to this story. After Bolton had been evicted from the ladies' lounge he had retired, vanquished (at least, in the eyes of the old ladies), to the Prince Consort wing. On his way he had passed through a small antechamber where a number of ladies had gathered while waiting to reoccupy their rightful territory. He had appeared unperturbed by his encounter with Edward, at most a trifle preoccupied. He might have passed through without noticing the ladies had not Miss Johnston abruptly hissed: "And I should think so too!" Captain Bolton had paused then and, smiling politely, had plucked a pale pink rose from a vase on one of the tables. Then, holding it delicately between finger and thumb, he had walked over to where the ladies were sitting. The more timorous ladies had looked away. Miss Johnston, however, was far from supine by nature (the Major had heard that her father had died on the Frontier, taking with him some astonishing number of the dark-skinned persons who had sought to oppose his will). She had straightened herself resolutely. Captain Bolton had stood there for a moment, bowed politely, and offered her the flower. Naturally she had refused it. He had continued to stand there, still smiling. It was an agonizing moment. At any instant, one felt, he might fly into an uncontrollable rage and, drawing his revolver, wreak his vengeance on the defenceless ladies. Instead of that, however, he had done an even more extraordinary thing. Slowly, methodically, petal by petal, he had begun to eat the rose. The ladies had watched him munching it in amazement and alarm. He was in no hurry. He did not wolf it as one might have expected (the man's reason was clearly unhinged). With his lips he had dragged off one petal after another, masticating each one slowly and with evident enjoyment until at last there were no petals left. But he had not stopped there. With his front teeth he had bitten off a part of the stem, calmly chewed it, swallowed it, and then bitten off another piece. In no time he had eaten the entire stem (on which there had been two or three wicked-looking thorns). The ladies had stared at him aghast, but he had merely smiled, bowed again, and strolled away.

The Major sighed when he heard this and agreed that it was an incredible way to behave. Later he asked Edward if it was true that he had telephoned to Dublin Castle. Edward nodded.

"There's something rather odd I've been meaning to tell you. D'you remember we had a good laugh the other day when I told you a rumour I'd heard about the water supply at the Castle?"

"I remember. Only the whiskey drinkers survived."

"That's right. Well, it's probably just a coincidence but the fellow I spoke to on the telephone was quite definitely tipsy...in fact, he was as drunk as a lord!"

THE TUAM MURDERS

Preaching in the Roman Catholic Cathedral, Tuam, on Sunday, the Most Rev. Dr Gilmartin said that he came to sympathize with the people of Tuam in the sickening horror and terror of last week. A foul murder of two policemen was committed within three miles of the town on the previous Monday evening. Had no reprisals been taken, he said, there would be a great wave of sympathy with the police. Commenting on the wrecking of the town, His Grace said that he need not add that one crime did not justify another...in this case the police had taken a terrible revenge on an innocent town. No matter from what quarter the encouragement came, the policemen committed a fearful crime in gutting a sleeping town with shot and fire. The town was vengefully and ruthlessly sacked by the official guardians of the peace, and if the Government did not make immediate compensation and reparation for the damage done, the sense of crying injustice would remain as a further menace to peace and good will.

* * *

All this time the hotel building continued its imperceptible slide towards ruin. The Major, though, like Edward, had almost come to terms with living beneath this spreading umbrella of decay. After all, the difference between expecting something to last for ever and expecting something, on the contrary, not to last for ever, the Major told himself, was not so very great. It was simply a question of getting used to the idea. Thus, when he put his foot through a floorboard in the carpeted corridor of the fourth floor, which these days hardly anyone ever visited, he sprang nimbly aside (the carpet had prevented him from making a sudden appearance on the floor below) with a muttered oath and the thought: “Dry rot!” But a glance at the ceiling was enough to tell him that for all he knew it might just as easily be wet rot. He informed Edward, of course. Edward sighed and said he would “consider the matter.” In the meantime the Major set about adapting himself to the fact that he was living in a building with rot, of one sort or another, in the upper storeys.

On another occasion, while leaning with his hands on a wash-basin and gazing in contemplation of his freshly shaved cheeks, he felt the basin slowly yield under his weight. It slid away from the wall, twisting the lead pipes so that it hung upside down and emptied a deluge of water over his slippered feet. For a few moments the plug swung gently to and fro on its chain like a clock pendulum. The Major dried his feet carefully and moved his belongings next door. This was by no means his first move. Since the episode of the decaying sheep’s head on his first visit he had moved a number of times for one reason or another.

It was true that the Major had the advantage of already having become accustomed during the war to an atmo-sphere of change, insecurity and decay. For the old ladies, on the other hand, who had lived all their lives with solid ground underfoot and a reliable roof overhead, it must have been a different matter. The Major sometimes lurked in the residents’ lounge, spying on them as they read of the day’s disasters in the newspaper. What must they be thinking as they read that a patrol of a dozen soldiers had been attacked in broad daylight between College Green and Westmoreland Street? The very heart of Imperial Dublin! In July alone there had been twenty-two people murdered and fifty-seven wounded, the majority of them policemen. While the Manchester Regiment suffered heavy losses in Mesopotamia (but there had always been some corner of the Empire where His Majesty’s subjects were causing trouble) were they relieved and gratified to read, that August, of the Restoration of Order in Ireland Act? Trial by court-martial (since locally conscripted juries had long ceased to be reliable) and the withholding of grants to local authorities which refused to discharge their obligations—the Major did not think for a moment that this would restore order in Ireland. Nor perhaps did the old ladies, for none of them looked in the least cheered as, with quivering cheeks, they read about it. On the first of September the partridge season opened. Birds were reported to be numerous.

One morning the Major and Edward found themselves standing in the potato field which lay within the boundary wall of the Majestic on the far side of the orchard. They stood there in silence, looking round at the rows of green plants in which stark, mysterious craters had begun to appear overnight, like the empty sockets of missing teeth.

“They’re even climbing the wall now. Next thing we know they’ll be sitting down at the table with us.”

“They have nothing to eat. What d’you expect?”

“It’s not my fault they have nothing to eat.”

“Oh, I know that. All I’m saying is that you can’t expect someone willingly to starve to death. What would you do in their shoes?”

“Don’t be absurd, Brendan. I wouldn’t allow myself to get into such a mess in the first place.”

The Major turned away to watch the crows flapping in lazy circles, looking for some nourishment from the newly turned soil. Between himself and Edward there was a long, dissatisfied silence.

Early in the afternoon the weak sunshine was masked with cloud, the sky crept nearer to the treetops and a

drizzle began to fall. The warm, clammy breath of autumn hung by the still open windows, but Edward, with absent-minded munificence, called for turf and log fires to be lit. It was not so much against the chill in the air as against the melancholy; everyone was touched by it. By half past four it was already quite dark outside, thanks to the drizzle. The Major, transfixed by sadness, was slumped in an armchair in the gun room with his elbows on a level with his ears, gazing into the fire or watching its reflection flicker in the shining, varnished scales of an immense stuffed pike. In the hotel's heyday this pike had succumbed to a gentleman with a title, name and date illegibly inscribed with spidery flourishes on a brass plate, and now it rested on the mantelpiece, its small, vicious mouth frozen open in impotent rage and despair.

The ladies never came into this room; it was a masculine preserve. In Ireland, of course, the distinction between the sexes had become blurred in recent years. Many young women were crack shots, the Major had heard, and would fire off both barrels without batting an eyelid. Someone he knew had a niece who was a fast bowler. Another girl, the young sister of one of his army friends, had been given a rhinoceros-hide whip for her sixteenth birthday; by the time she was eighteen she could flick a cigar out of a man's lips at twenty paces. And of course there was the Countess Markievicz who day and night wore a pistol on her hip, it was said, and thought nothing of shooting a man between the eyes. He had heard, too, that these days girls smoked cigars and drank port. But all that was the younger generation. Older ladies had been brought up with different ideas on how it was seemly to behave. It was rather a relief to know that here in the gun room he was protected from them—because after all, he couldn't spend *all* his life with old ladies. Of course, young ladies (if there had been any) would not think twice about barging in here for a smoke and a chat. But against *them* the Major did not particularly feel he wanted to be protected.

He sighed. He had been avoiding the Majestic's ladies all day. This evening they would feel they had been neglected. At dinner he would very likely be snubbed by Miss Staveley. He would receive vinegary glances from some of the others. It had happened before.

Edward came in and sat down in an armchair beside him. Having taken a spill from a pewter mug on the mantelpiece, he proceeded to light his pipe, saying between puffs that he would be going up to town tomorrow to see Ripon, was there anything the Major wanted?

"No thanks."

"Sarah has to see her doctor, so I may as well give her a lift. Save her the train journey."

The Major sighed enviously, thinking how much he would like to motor up to Dublin in Sarah's company. There would be room for him in the Daimler, moreover. But Edward showed no sign of inviting him to join them and for some reason he felt unable to broach the subject. He sighed again, disgruntled. She was only a friend, of course. The pike's small bad-tempered mouth and wicked teeth expressed his mood to perfection.

"Will it be safe travelling by yourselves?"

"Oh, I should think so," Edward replied blandly. After a moment he added reflectively: "What a state the country's in! You know, Brendan, I sometimes think 'to hell with them all'...The way they've ruined life in this country I sometimes feel that I'd welcome a holocaust. Since they want destruction, give it to them. I'd like to see everything smashed and in ruins so that they really taste what destruction means. Things have gone so far in Ireland now that that's the only way they can be settled with justice, by reducing everything to rubble. D'you understand what I mean?"

"No," said the Major sourly.

After Edward had left for Dublin on the following morning the Major took a walk with Rover (who was getting old, poor dog) as far as the summer house and then looked back across the lawns towards the Majestic. How dilapidated it looked from this angle! The great chimneys towering over the hulk of wood and stone gave it the appearance of a beached Dreadnought. The ivy had begun to grow, to spread greedily over the vast, many-windowed wall adjacent to the Palm Court...indeed, it appeared to spread out from the Palm Court itself, through a broken pane in the roof: one could just make out a trunk which emerged thick and hairy as a man's thigh before advancing multifingered over the stone. Rusting drainpipes bulged on the southern walls like varicose veins. "Maybe," thought the Major, "the ivy will help hold the place together for a bit longer."

Ripon stood beside the statue of Queen Victoria with one elegantly shod foot on the running-board of a shining Rolls-Royce. His eyes shielded by a tweed cap, he was staring up uncertainly at the windows of the first floor. His manner, the Major thought, was oddly furtive as he started towards the front steps. He stopped abruptly when he saw the Major and seemed disconcerted.

"Oh hello."

"Hello."

"Didn't know you were back here. Thought I'd just drop in..."

"Your father's not at home. In fact, I understand that he's planning to visit *you* today."

Ripon's eyebrows shot up, miming surprise and despair. "What a nuisance!"

"He'll be back this evening so why don't you stay? I know he's anxious to see you."

"That's a bit difficult, actually. You see..." The Major waited, but Ripon's explanation lapsed into silence. Over his shoulder he glimpsed the motionless silhouette of a chauffeur behind the steering-wheel. Meanwhile Ripon, in turn, was looking over the Major's shoulder with curious longing at the half-open front door. But the

Major, half turning, assured himself that there was nobody standing there, only the dog Rover and one of the maids cleaning the brasswork on the massive front door. Could it be that the boy was homesick? wondered the Major, touched.

"You really should stay."

"Wish I could, old man. Only wish I could...Fact is..." But again the explanation was still-born.

"Well, at least come in for a moment. You can write him a note or something."

But Ripon paid no attention to this suggestion. Instead, he turned towards the motor car and with gloomy animation began pointing out its virtues to the Major. The size, the speed, the comfort...

"It looks a splendid vehicle."

"Not mine, of course. Old man Noonan lent it to me for the day to motor over and see the old parent. Very civilized of him. Thoughtful." He advanced on the motor car, summoning the Major.

"This is Driscoll. Come and meet him, Driscoll's a brick."

The chauffeur was a thin sandy-haired youth with bulging eyes and the abnormally solemn face of the impudent; the Major had seen his type in the army, where trouble-makers reveal themselves as surely as acid on litmus paper. He nodded curtly. Driscoll lifted his peaked cap with more deference than the situation required. Ripon was once more gazing greedily at the front door. Reluctantly dragging his eyes away, he said: "Splendid driver, aren't you, Driscoll?"

"If you say so, sir."

"See you at Brooklands one of these days, eh? Almost hit a heifer on the way over...I tell you, Major, he's a real bright spark. Hey, on parade!" And Ripon, lunging forward, knocked the peaked cap off Driscoll's head on to the gravel. Driscoll instantly dropped into a boxing stance, right fist guarding his chin, left fist pumping exaggeratedly back and forth, chuckling as Ripon feinted in one direction and tried to land a blow from the other. The Major watched, in dismay.

"You'll find me in the house," he said sharply and turned away, thankful that Edward was not on hand to see his son skylarking with the chauffeur.

"Hey, wait a minute. Wouldn't you like to go for a ride in her? Wait, Major...look, I thought Driscoll might take you for a drive around while I'm writing a note for the old man."

"No thanks." The Major had already reached the door. He turned and glanced back. Driscoll was picking up his cap. Ripon's round cherubic face was looking towards him in consternation. "Whatever is the matter with the fellow?" wondered the Major.

Feeling tired and somewhat feverish (he believed he must have a cold coming on), the Major went upstairs to his room and lay on his bed. But presently he got up again, searched through the drawers of his dressing-table for a cigarette, found one and lit it. The tobacco tasted dry and stale. He put it out almost immediately.

A few minutes later he made his way along the dusty corridor towards a room which looked out over the drive. The Rolls-Royce was still standing there. Driscoll was sitting on the running-board flicking gravel. Ripon was talking earnestly to one of the maids under the orangerie door; the Major could just see the white starched cuff of her sleeve moving against the black material of her uniform.

A few more minutes elapsed before he made up his mind to go downstairs again. But Ripon was no longer to be seen. Wearily the Major set off to look for him, trailing through one room after another. Rover, uncomfortable in Edward's absence, trotted at the Major's heels, as anxious as he was himself to find whoever it was they were looking for. The Major stopped. He felt delirious and thought: "I must have caught a chill. It's like being in a maze. I've walked for miles. Are those footsteps I can hear or am I imagining things? I must avoid the rooms where the old women will be at this time... Really, I feel quite ill." He turned and retraced his steps swiftly. It was Murphy.

The Major was astonished, never having known Murphy to follow anyone. On the contrary, the old rascal usually made himself scarce. Murphy stood his ground, though irresolutely, avoiding the Major's eye. But the Major was in no mood to be trifled with and, grasping the old man by the lapels of his faded, stained livery, he said harshly: "Well?" Murphy made an incoherent reply. What was he trying to say? The Major shook him. But no, the old fellow was merely caught in the spasm of a long and wheezing cough that dampened the back of the Major's hand.

"Where's Ripon?"

Murphy pointed upwards and whispered: "Fourt' floor." His wizened skull of a face with its bushy yellow eyebrows peered up at the Major, lips contracting back over empty gums in which stood two or three discoloured teeth. Shocked, the Major stepped back a pace. The old blackguard was smiling! Clenching his fist, he all but drove it into Murphy's face. With an effort he restrained himself. He turned on his heel and strode rapidly towards the foyer, Rover at his heels. He was conscious that Murphy was following at a distance.

He climbed the stairs painfully. He was suffocated. Murphy had vanished up some dark ancillary staircase of which perhaps only he knew the secret. But on the second floor he glimpsed him again, motionless, watching, half concealed by a linen-room door. The Major ignored him. What did the rascal want spying on him all the time?

At last he reached the fourth floor. He paused after a few paces along the corridor and steadied himself, thinking: "I must be feverish." He had a sore throat. His throat was painfully dry. He had to keep swallowing.

Rover had been waiting for him to move forward but now pricked up his ears, alerted by some faint sound. Nose to the carpet he surged forward without waiting for the Major. He stopped outside one of the rooms and scratched at the door. A few feet away the Major halted and watched. Rover scratched the door again.

The door was opened a few inches. Rover vanished inside. The door closed again.

For a few moments the Major tried to visualize the scene that Rover would now be confronted with. Then he turned and tiptoed back the way he had come, stood for a while on the landing, thinking: “After all, it’s none of my business,” and finally made up his mind to retire to his own room. An hour or so later he got up and went to look down into the drive. The Rolls-Royce was no longer there. At six o’clock one of the maids pushed a note under his door. It was from Ripon and said: “Please don’t mention my being here to Father. Ripon.”

His incipient cold had taken away his appetite, so he did not go down for dinner. Instead, he got between the sheets fully dressed (the room was chilly) and dozed fitfully until late in the evening when there was a knock at the door. He sat up.

It was Edward. He stared in surprise as the Major, fully clad in waistcoat, collar and tie, threw aside his bedclothes and swung his trousered legs over the side of the bed.

“Look, about Ripon...” the Major began, dazed and forgetting Ripon’s instructions.

“Oh, he was in splendid form,” Edward told him cheerfully. “Spent the afternoon with him while Sarah was with her surgeon fellow in Harcourt Street. Mind you, he’ll need a bit of a helping hand...”

He was interrupted by a deafening volley of sneezes from the Major, whose head drooped wearily between his knees while he groped for a handkerchief.

“I say, you seem to have caught a bit of a cold,” Edward said sympathetically.

The Major nodded, his eyes streaming. On second thoughts he decided to swing his legs back into bed and pull the blankets up to his chin.

“You got your hair cut,” the Major mused.

“Eh? Yes, so I did. Stopped in at Prost’s this afternoon before going out to Ripon’s place in Rathmines. I mean, I couldn’t very well turn up there looking like an organ-grinder’s monkey, now, could I?”

“Of course not,” agreed the Major grimly.

All next morning Edward was in a terrible rage. His anger crashed and boomed around the Majestic, rattling the windows and scaring the wits out of servants and animals alike. A small dent had appeared in one of the wings of the Standard while he had been away in Dublin. Small though it was, it appeared to be this dent which was stimulating his explosions of passion. Naturally suspicion centred on Faith and Charity, although they wasted no time in swearing on their mother’s grave (and, when that failed to work, on their sister’s) that they were innocent. The Major was summoned to inspect the damage, but was unable to mollify Edward by saying that he thought it trivial. The twins, meanwhile, were darting covert glances in his direction, trying to warn him by telepathy not to mention it if he had seen them by the garages.

“Besides,” the Major lied weakly, unable to resist feminine distress, “they spent most of the day with me.”

The twins looked comforted, but Edward merely glanced at the Major in scornful disbelief. The twins were banished to separate rooms, locked in, and given only bread and water for lunch. Edward retired to the squash court to brood in the company of his piglets. It was the not owning up afterwards or, in other words, the telling of lies which was the real crime. He had made that quite plain. This was something he would not tolerate in his children.

The Major listened to this pronouncement with an expression of cold surprise, with one eyebrow sardonically raised, and with a running nose. Besides, given the hotel’s state of disrepair he considered it eccentric to notice a small dent in a motor car.

As for the Major, his cold was much worse and he had just decided to spend the rest of the day in bed when a message arrived from Sarah to say that she was bored and would like to come to the Majestic “to see everyone” and would he come and collect her? He was ill. He had a considerable fever (such that at times he found himself wondering whether he hadn’t simply dreamed the events of the day before). His nose was red, sore and still streaming. Every now and then he was convulsed by shuddering sneezes. At intervals he felt giddy. But now that the opportunity presented itself nothing would prevent him from seeing Sarah. Inflamed equally by his fever and by some whiskey that Edward had made him drink, he stopped on the way to buy some flowers and a box of chocolates.

“The blighter must have been waiting for me,” he thought peevishly as Mr Devlin hurried out of the bank to intercept him at the gate. The flowers and chocolates he was holding made his intentions all too plain. Mr Devlin’s eyes rested on them for a moment, expressionlessly. Then he was greeting the Major with his customary effusion.

He and Mrs Devlin (and a certain young lady too) saw far too little of the Major these days, he informed the Major, and for this reason he must insist, indeed he wouldn’t take no for an answer, that the Major should accord him a few moments of his precious time now that he had finally had the good luck to set eyes on him...a piece of good luck which occurred all too seldom since the Major undoubtedly had a great number of good friends here in Kilnalough...so he shouldn’t mind, rather he should expect to be “kidnapped” by those

who suffered from the deprivation of his company.

The Major nodded moodily at this extravagant preamble, looking at his watch. But Mr Devlin did not mean to be deterred. He steered the Major firmly into the bank, along a corridor in which there hung a smell of boiled cabbage, and into a comfortless office. On entering the Major sneezed explosively and had to mop a trail of mucus from his sleeve. He sat down in misery while once again Mr Devlin's eye rested on the flowers and chocolates.

Did the Major have a cold? It was plain that he paid too little heed to his health. He must partake of a sup of something to warm him. The Major protested feebly, but Mr Devlin had already seized a bottle of whiskey and a glass. Sweating, the Major felt once more that he must be having a dream.

"I'm afraid that Sarah may be waiting for me."

"Not at all at all," Mr Devlin reassured him, smoothing his already smooth hair with a delicate white hand. "We have time for a nice little chat now."

The Major drank some whiskey and blew his nose unsatisfactorily.

And how was Mr Spencer getting along these days? There was another of his good and generous friends...very generous, he had done more for "a certain young lady" (he winked roguishly, distressing the Major) than could ever be repaid, more anyway than *he* would ever be able to repay, and all out of the kindness of his heart...

A sudden pause ensued, as if Mr Devlin had just asked a question, which of course he had not. The Major, in any event, could think of nothing to add to his remarks.

Not only with money (Mr Devlin gave the Major some more whiskey), not only with money, though to give that "certain young lady" the proper care would have been beyond his own means with medical expenses being what they were, no, not only with money, though the Major was probably unaware of the extra expense involved in having a semi-invalid in the house whose prospects for marriage...ah, well, that was a different story and one couldn't blame her for that, now, could one? it was the luck of the draw...but she was a self-willed girl and though he and Mrs Devlin saved what they could they would have to provide for their old age and even with a fortune behind her an invalid would be hard put to it to make a decent match but that was life...not only with money, though he prided himself on knowing its value, but with acts of kindness, sure, he would go out of his way to help someone, would he not?

"He would," assented the Major, the whiskey providing him with an Irish turn of speech.

He'd do anything for you and that was the truth, one had only to look at the way he had taken her up to Dublin in his motor car yesterday...but of course the Major would know all about that, since he had most probably gone up to Dublin with them?

There was a long pause until the Major said: "Really, no more, thank you. I've already had more than is good for me."

Oh, he could manage just a little drop to boil the germs out of him, sure he could, it was rare to find a man who'd do a Christian act like that out of the goodness of his heart, so to speak, and he understood that the specialist had taken a fair old time about it, keeping the young lady waiting around annoyingly for a good part of the day, the morning anyway (?), but that he'd given her a splendid report in the end so that it was worth waiting all that time (?)...irritating though it must have been to Mr Spencer who probably had a hundred and one things to do, and to the Major?

"No trouble to me, Mr Devlin," the Major burst out with sudden irritation, "because I wasn't there. But I think I can say quite honestly—I won't drink any more, thank you—that I wouldn't have minded waiting all week if it had helped Sarah to walk again as she's walking now."

"To be sure, that's very kind of you. So you weren't in Dublin with them?"

"No, I wasn't. As for it being kind of me, why, anyone would do the same."

"Ah, I suppose..."

Mr Devlin fell silent, his troubled eyes on the Major's face as if he were anxious to confide something in him but not quite able to bring himself to speak. The Major, in any case, had got to his feet, having disposed of his glass, and was walking directly to the door with a plain determination not to be stopped.

"Still, she's a worry to her mother not being married yet at her age, a great worry, it's only natural..."

"Natural or not, Mr Devlin," said the Major sharply, having lost all patience, "it's..." But he could think of no way of ending the sentence. He left it hanging ominously in the air and strode out of the office with Mr Devlin fussing somewhere behind him and muttering deferential instructions: to the right here, there's a door, yes, then up the stairs and...

"What a frightful fellow!" thought the Major giddily. "And to have such a nice daughter." He looked round, but Mr Devlin had retired and he was outside a door he recognized as that of Sarah's room.

He had barely rapped on it when Sarah opened it, caught him by the sleeve and pulled him inside, saying: "Why have you taken so long, Brendan? I heard your car arrive ages ago."

"Well..."

"Oh, you're so slow," Sarah said impatiently, "and you have a cold. Really, you're such a child! What can you expect if you wander around in that absurd bathing-costume in the middle of winter? You'll catch your death, I expect, and serve you right."

"Your father gave me a drink."

"My father? He said something to you? He asked you something about me?"

"Well, not really..."

"Ah, I knew as much. He wouldn't dare say anything to my face!"

"But no, I assure you, he merely wanted a chat."

Sarah had sat down awkwardly and without ceremony, ignoring him. She stood up again and made for the door.

"Are we ready then?"

"No. Wait here. Ah, these dratted stairs...D'you know why they give me a room up here? They think they'll keep me a prisoner," she muttered furiously, and went out, dragging the door closed behind her. The Major was left standing there with the chocolates and flowers (which were blood-red roses); he had just cleared his throat, on the point of presenting them.

A moment later he heard the sound of angry voices from below. He held his breath but was unable to hear what was being said. "Heavens!" he thought wretchedly, "I've started another family row."

Sarah called from below that he should go down, they were ready to leave, she didn't want to climb the "dratted stairs" again. Still clutching his roses and chocolates, the Major made his way down. He was following Sarah into the street when Mr Devlin materialized at his elbow and whispered: "You mustn't mind her. She gets excited. She's very high-strung, you know, Major, but she means no harm...Indeed, it clears the air...Her music makes her temperamental, you see, it's always the way..."

The Major nodded curtly but showed no inclination to pause and discuss the matter. Mr Devlin dropped back into the shadows of the corridor from which he had appeared, murmuring that the Major should call more often, that he was always welcome under their...Under their what? The Major did not wait to hear. "Roof," he supposed.

"What on earth are you carrying, Brendan? Are you going to visit someone sick in bed?"

"They're for you."

"For *me*?" Sarah exclaimed, laughing. "How ridiculous you are! What on earth shall I do with such things? But, very well...I'll accept them. It's really very kind of you. In fact, you are a terribly kind person, I can see that plainly. With your flowers and chocolates you remind me of Mulcahy."

"Oh? The rural swain?" asked the Major, offended.

"Now I've hurt your feelings, Brendan. It's just like the old days."

As they motored through the tranquil streets of Kilnalough the Major, eyes blurred, nose red and mouth gaping like a fish, peered gloomily at the peaceful shops and houses, some of which already had turf-smoke rising from their chimneys, and wondered whether one day there would be trouble in these streets too.

On the outskirts of Kilnalough a shabby old man hurled a stone at them as they went sailing by—but feebly. It missed by a considerable distance. The Major pretended not to notice.

The twins had not been liberated. There was no sign of them in the writing-room, where a fire was blazing in the hearth and where card-tables covered in green baize had been set up, each with a neat stack of playing-cards, a scoring pad and a sharpened pencil.

"I say, you don't really feel like playing whist, do you?" asked the Major, his eyes closed to the merest slits in an attempt to avoid surrendering to another volley of sneezes. He hoped that she felt as reluctant as he did.

"But of course! That's what I came for. What a frightful smell of cats there is in this room."

The Major could smell nothing because of his cold, but he had already noticed that one or two cats, presumably ejected by the servants who had put up the card-tables, were pressing discontented faces against the closed windows.

"Something will have to be done about the cats. Miss Staveley found a litter of kittens in her knitting-basket the other day. And at night they have the most fearful battles up and down the corridors. One can hardly get any sleep."

Hitherto whist had been informal, merely a way of crossing some of the great expanses of time that stretched like deserts over the afternoon and evening at the Majestic, deserts through which the lonely caravan of old ladies (together with Mr Norton and, on occasions, the Major or Edward) was obliged to make its way. But this time everything was different. Not only had real card-tables been set up and the cats expelled but the ladies, forewarned that this was to be a social occasion, had dressed up in their most splendid clothes and most luxuriantly feathered hats. A glorious riot of coloured plumage waved beside extravagant creations inspired by the garden and executed in silk, satin, leghorn and organdie. And of all the magnificent hats that greeted the Major's weeping eyes none was finer, as was only to be expected, than the golden pheasant, perfect in every detail, which was riding Miss Staveley's thin white curls.

"We must cheer ourselves up some way or another," Edward told him. "Keep up morale and so forth."

The Major went up to his room to get some dry handkerchiefs and lingered there morosely for a while. When he came downstairs again he found that Mrs Rice, Miss Porteous and Mr Norton were all impatiently waiting for him to join their table. The cards had been dealt. The other tables were already playing.

Sarah was at a table with Miss Staveley, Edward and the Reverend Mr Daly. As for the Major, he was expected to partner Mrs Rice throughout the afternoon. He already knew from past experience that her grasp

of the principles of the game was anything but firm. He mastered with difficulty a great explosion of rage as she led with her trumps on the first hand, but he knew that the real reason for his irritation was the deprivation of Sarah's company, for which, feverish and vulnerable, he felt an acute longing.

For most of the afternoon he sat at the same table (for Edward had organized the contest so that winners moved to the next table, losers stayed in their seats), periodically convulsed by sneezes which had opponents and partner wincing away from him, eyes barely open, light-headed, moustache bedraggled, miserable beyond words. And yet this rare social occasion was undeniably a brilliant success. The ladies of the Majestic had been in poor spirits recently. With the approach of winter, aches, pains, insomnia and bowel discomforts proliferated; under the compulsion of shortening days the ladies were once more funnelled towards the dreadful gauntlet of December, January and February which most of them had already run over seventy times before, reluctantly forced through it like sheep through a sheep dip—it was appalling, this ruthless movement of the seasons, how many would survive? Looking round bleakly, the Major was sorry for them and for a moment, as his mind strayed from his own misery, was glad that they were enjoying themselves. Troubles forgotten, shawled and feathered, they sat round the card-tables chattering and squabbling like great plump birds around a feeding-trough, laughing, teasing young Padraig (who had appeared with his grandfather) and forgetting what they were saying and whose turn it was to play and all talking at once and no one really listening. The men too were enjoying themselves. Mr Norton had allowed his preference for youth to lapse for the occasion and flirted with any lady who appeared at his table. The Reverend Daly beamed cheerfully and encouraged his partner to greater efforts. Even old Dr Ryan who, chin on chest and grumbling constantly, seemed positively unable to keep his eyes open, nevertheless won consistently in company with Miss Archer, hand after hand after hand—which caused immense difficulties since his body, if not his mind, was to all intents inert and had to be carried, chair and all, from one table to the next (the rule that winners moved, losers stayed where they were, being quite inflexible). Murphy, naturally, was selected to do all the carrying, but he mumbled and groaned and heaved to such pitifully little effect that Seán had to be called from the garden, springing immaculately groomed from the neighbourhood of the compost heap, to help.

Of the gentlemen only the tutor, summoned from his room above the kitchens to make up the numbers, seemed ill at ease, perhaps because Miss Bagley was cross at being given him as a partner: after all, he was "practically one of the servants," she whispered to the unsympathetic Major when they found themselves at the same table. She watched him like a hawk and rebuked him sharply if his attention appeared to wander, calling him "partner" with bitter irony. A faint flush crept up Evans's pale pocked cheeks. The Major sighed, feeling sorry for the man (Miss Bagley, besides, was by no means his favourite among the old ladies), but at the same time he was irritated. After all, the fellow could surely afford to buy himself a new collar or two to replace the thing like a dish-rag that he was wearing.

Old Mrs Rappaport was blind, of course, and so could not play. She sat on a straight-backed chair by the fire, glum and disapproving, refusing to admit that she was comfortable and warm enough, refusing to answer the pleasant remarks that were spoken into one ear or another as the winning players shuffled past her in the periodic changing of tables. Shortly before tea was served, a thickset marmalade cat (which the Major thought he recognized as a former inhabitant of the Imperial Bar) emerged from the forest of chair- and table-legs and jumped on to her lap. It was greeted with cries of surprise. Where had it come from? Windows and doors were shut. The room had been diligently searched beforehand. There was a fire in the fireplace, so it could hardly have come down the chimney (a favourite trick of the cats at the Majestic), it was absolutely impossible that the beast could have got in...yet here it was! The Major, as it happened, knew the answer to this problem. He had earlier noticed that evil, orange, horridly whiskered head poking itself out of a rent in the side of a massive velvet sofa on the far side of the room. The creature presumably lived in there. The Major took a perverse pleasure in keeping this knowledge to himself, merely smiling in a superior way at the general bafflement. Nor did he relent when Mr Norton genuinely alarmed some of the ladies by saying that there must be a witch in the room, that the cat was quite plainly a witch's familiar and that he for one had already had a spell put on him by one of the ladies present (he glanced roguishly at Sarah and attempted to place a trembling hand on her knee). A witch in the room! The ladies laughed nervously and tried to avoid looking too plainly into each other's haggard, wrinkled faces.

"What piffle," said Edward. "We'll soon get rid of the animal." And getting to his feet he made to remove the cat from Mrs Rappaport's lap. But she would have none of it, demanding petulantly that "her" cat should be left in peace. She even went so far as to call it "Pussy"; the cat narrowed its acid green eyes and flexed its claws, which were as sharp as hatpins.

"You're all enjoying yourselves," she cried. "I just sit here...I don't know, why haven't I got any tea?"

"No one has yet," Edward soothed her. "Tea will be served in a few minutes."

Mrs Rappaport sniffed ill-temperedly. The attempt to remove the cat was abandoned and it remained where it was, relaxed but alert, flicking its tail from time to time as it watched the swaying feathers and nodding plumes of the ladies' hats.

After tea the Major sank into a nightmarish daze in which it no longer seemed to matter when Mrs Rice played an ace or a trump to make doubly sure of tricks he had already won. He even gave up trying to win enough tricks to progress to the next table where Sarah and Edward had been losing steadily for some time; all his attention was taken by sucking in air through his parched lips and dealing with the steady trickle of

fluid from his nose with sodden handkerchiefs. Slumped in his chair, he thought wearily: “What a disgusting animal I am!” But at that moment Mrs Rice eagerly tugged his sleeve and alerted him to the fact that they had won at last. While he had been day-dreaming she had played her cards with the cunning of a fox. At last they could move. Moreover, Sarah and Edward had lost yet again, so they would be at the same table.

“You poor thing,” Sarah said to him cheerfully, putting cool fingers on his damp brow. “You do look a mess! Edward must fill you with whiskey after supper and you must go to bed.”

“Oh, I’m all right.”

“Don’t be so grumpy.”

“I’m not.”

“You certainly sound it.”

“I can’t help that.”

Sarah grimaced with annoyance and turned away to talk to Mrs Rice, who was still flushed and jubilant over her victory.

They began to play. The Major played his cards at random, no longer able to remember what his partner and opponents had played. Sarah glanced at him one or twice but said nothing. He fell into a gloomy reverie until suddenly, without warning, Mrs Rice asked: “And how was dear Ripon, Mr Spencer? I hear you went to see him when you were in Dublin yesterday.”

The Major glanced from Edward to Sarah, who was studying her cards serenely as if she had not heard the question. A faint flush, however, had tinged her neck and cheeks. What could Edward say? The Major coldly watched the troubled expression on his face as he framed a reply. He was on the point of answering Mrs Rice’s question when he was prevented by a sudden and most terrible commotion.

The recent rearrangement of opponents had brought Miss Staveley to within a few feet of where Mrs Rappaport was sitting with the cat on her lap. For the past few minutes the cat’s bitter green eyes had been glued to the plump pheasant which clung defencelessly to the crown of Miss Staveley’s magnificent hat. With each movement that she made the bird’s sweeping tail-feathers trembled deliciously. At last, tantalized beyond endurance, the cat sprang from Mrs Rappaport’s lap, hurtled through the air in a horrid orange flash and pounced on Miss Staveley’s black velvet shoulders, sinking its hideous claws into the bird’s delicate plumage. Miss Staveley uttered a shriek and sank forward on to the card-table while the cat, precariously balanced on her shoulders, ripped and clawed savagely at her headgear in an explosion of feathers. There was pandemonium. The ladies cried out in alarm. The men voiced gruff barks of astonishment and leaped to their feet. But still the beast savaged its prey. At last Edward and the Major, knocking chairs aside, stumbled to the rescue. But before they could reach Miss Staveley the tutor sprang forward and dealt the beast a terrible blow on the back of the neck. It gave a piercing wail, thin as the shriek of a child, and dropped senseless to the carpet.

Silence fell. Everyone in the room froze. In the sudden stillness the crackling of a log in the fireplace seemed unnaturally loud. The tutor stooped and picked up the cat. For an instant, as he held it high over his head, there was a savage rictus on his white pocked face. Then he hurled it across the room with terrible force. It smacked against the wall with a sickening thud and dropped lifeless to the floor. There was a sharp intake of breath, and everyone peered at the shapeless marmalade bundle.

The Major was not quite sure what happened next. He saw the fierce exultation slowly fade from the tutor’s face. His eyes dropped to the carpet and he shuffled back to his table, flushed and self-conscious. Nobody said a word to him. He began to study his cards with unseeing eyes.

Meanwhile Edward and the ladies were bustling around Miss Staveley with smelling-salts and sympathy while she sobbed fitfully and tried to unpin the shattered remains of her hat from her white curls. The doctor was applied to for advice and although he murmured disagreeably: “Och... give her some air. She’ll be all right,” nobody was prepared to accept that this was all he had to say. The Murphys were summoned to pick up his chair and he was carried bodily across the room (muttering unheeded protests) to be deposited at Miss Staveley’s side. There the lids came down over his eyes and he appeared to fall asleep. Miss Staveley, in any case, was coming along splendidly and really had no need of medical help. She was even beginning rather to enjoy being the centre of attention and presently she was describing what it feels like to be pounced on and to have “cruel claws” digging into one’s shoulders. What a business! Everyone was trying to make himself heard over the babble, to describe how it had looked to *him*, from where he was sitting, that ruthless feline thunderbolt which had sped across the room to attack Miss Staveley’s hat. In the hubbub of voices only Mrs Rappaport, grim and catless on her chair by the fireside, remained silent.

“Would you like some more tea, Mrs Rappaport?” asked the Major, who felt sorry for her. But she merely shook her head. The corners of her mouth drew down as if she were about to cry.

As interest in Miss Staveley subsided people remembered the cat which had been the cause of the commotion. It was still lying there against the foot of the wall. Its mouth was partly open; through its wickedly sharp teeth a little blood was leaking on to the parquet floor. The elder Murphy was told to dispose of it but he refused, saying he didn’t dare touch it. Edward grimaced with annoyance but did not waste time arguing the point. There was a moment of tension as he turned it over with his shoe, as if everyone expected it suddenly to revive and start tearing him to pieces. But the animal was quite plainly dead.

“Mr Evans, I wonder, would you mind?” The tutor looked up from the cards he was studying. He hesitated

for a moment, his face expressionless, then he got to his feet without a word, picked the cat up by its dark-ringed orange tail and left the room.

"The strength of some of those fellas is positively fr-frightful..." Mr Norton said to the Major, who was not sure whether he was referring to the tutor or to the cat.

When Evans returned Edward said that, rather than end on such an unfortunate note, everyone should sit down and play another hand or two, if they felt like it, and try to forget this unpleasant little episode. And presently, though in a rather subdued fashion, the players began to chatter about other things. The odour of fear and violence gradually dissipated.

When he had thrown a few more pieces of turf and wood on to the fire Edward sat down and said cheerfully: "Now whose turn was it to play and what were we talking about?"

"Your turn. Mrs Rice had just asked you about your visit to Ripon when you were in Dublin yesterday."

"Ah yes," said Edward and once more a strained expression appeared on his face. But before he could say a word Sarah exclaimed: "Oh, we had a lovely time, Mrs Rice, and Ripon is getting along wonderfully. Did you know that he married a friend of mine, Máire Noonan, from Kilnalough? Such a nice girl..." and she went on to talk about Máire, though Mrs Rice, who believed she was missing one of her cards (how many did everyone else have?) was not really listening. As for the Major, he lowered his jealous eyes to the fan of cards in his hand and said no more. He thought: "That evening with me in London must have meant nothing to her after all."

Certain of the guests, including Dr Ryan, his grandson and Sarah, had been invited to stay for supper. Padraig had begun the afternoon affecting a cautious and supercilious manner. He had relaxed, however, on hearing that the twins had been locked up and soon became expansive, even voluble. Like the Major he appeared to be partial to older ladies. The Major, who was looking for the doctor (his cold was at its zenith and he was afraid he had pneumonia), overheard the lad describing to Miss Bagley in minute detail the martyrdom of Saint Sebastian. Miss Bagley murmured "Dear me!" at intervals, genuinely horrified.

The doctor had vanished, as he had a habit of doing when the old ladies might want to discuss their ailments with him. But he was so old and infirm that the Major was confident that he would be able to track him down without much difficulty—and so it proved. He came upon him sitting in the Palm Court, little frequented these days for a number of reasons: one, of course, was the usual difficulty of the foliage having swallowed up most of the chairs and tables; another was the lack of light, since there were no gas mantles and the "Do More" generator had been idle for many a month—there were oil lamps, of course, but they gave the place such an eerie and frightening atmosphere (all those weird shapes and shadows lurking beyond the circle of light) that it was almost better to do without. Yet another, and even more conclusive, reason was the fact that Miss Porteous had somehow convinced herself that she had been bitten in there by a poisonous spider. The Major had declared this to be nonsense, but curiously enough Miss Porteous did have an enormous blue swelling on the wrist over which the offending spider was supposed to have walked. At any rate, after dark none of the ladies would have considered going in there for a moment—which was why the Major was not in the least surprised to see the doctor there, sitting in a cane chair beside the glass door into the lounge. This door afforded enough light for the Major to see that the doctor was awake. He explained that he had a cold, a very bad cold which he was afraid—he added ominously, seeing the doctor stir with impatience—might turn into something worse.

"A cold, is it?" grunted the old man querulously. "Sure, we all get 'em...a cold is nothing at all."

And he went on to say something confused about things not being the way they used to be...or perhaps people weren't the way they used to be, one or the other, or perhaps both, it was hard to make out precisely.

"But I just want to know what medicine to take," the Major interrupted him plaintively. He had been going hot and cold by turns and felt that at any moment he would be suffocated by fever or roasted alive, if he was not actually poignarded to death by the painful "absence-of-Sarah" that had suddenly started to afflict him—indeed, the pangs of self-pity and Sarahlessness became appallingly acute as he listened to the old man grumbling on. A wave of fever clutched him. His shirt and underwear clung damply to his skin.

"Thought you'd come sooner or later," the doctor was saying contemptuously. "This is no place for the likes of you...You must leave Ireland, leave Kilnalough, it's no place at all now for a British gentleman like you. Clear yourself out of here, bag and baggage, before it's too late!"

"But I only asked about my cold," protested the Major petulantly. "I suppose I shall have to go to bed before it gets any worse."

"Yes, go to bed, go to bed, that's it," sneered the doctor. "You're as right as rain, just sorry for yourself."

The doctor, splendid old chap though he no doubt *was*, thought the Major indignantly, was really becoming a tiny bit tiresome.

The great gong boomed for dinner. The Major dolefully wandered along a corridor. Padraig was still talking volubly to the alarmed Miss Bagley as they passed on their way to the dining-room. Did she know...did she know...did she know then what had happened to Héloise and Abélard? he was asking slyly, well, to Abélard anyway, since nothing much in *that* line could happen to Héloise? Well, he'd better not be telling her because it might spoil her appetite...

The Major decided not to go in to dinner. Instead he sat down dizzily in an armchair in the residents' lounge, not his favourite room at the Majestic but he felt too weak to go any farther. His mouth open like a dying fish, he fell asleep. His last conscious image was of Dr Ryan pottering past, grumbling to himself, his stick held in a knobbly, freckled hand.

"Go on out of it, the whole bally lot o' ye," he might have been muttering as his boots scraped by on the other side of the Major's drooping eyelids—but before it had time to consider this, his waking mind had slipped away into a quieter and darker area beyond.

* * *

MESOPOTAMIA

Serious Agitation on the Lower Euphrates

The situation in Mesopotamia shows some improvement in the disturbed areas, but is becoming more tense in the districts not yet in open rebellion. The Lower Euphrates and Hammar Lake neighbourhood are being seriously affected by the agitation now breaking out among the Muntafik Arabs. The besieging forces are said to be increasing in numbers.

* * *

TERRIBLE OUTBREAK IN BALBRIGGAN

Town Partially Destroyed by Fire

During Monday night and Tuesday morning there was a violent outbreak in Balbriggan, following the murder of Head Constable Burke in that town. Head Constable Burke, with other police in plain clothes, had motored from Dublin on their way to Gormanstown. At Balbriggan they stopped for refreshments, which were refused by the publican. In the disturbance which appears to have ensued, revolver shots were discharged, and the Head Constable was shot dead, and his brother, Sergeant Burke, was wounded. Subsequently, it is stated, a number of auxiliary police stationed at Gormanstown came into Balbriggan. Many houses were burned and shots fired in the streets. Two civilians were killed during the night. In the morning large numbers of the panic-stricken population left the town by road and railway and apparently only those who were unable to get away remained.

* * *

EYE-WITNESS STORY

An old gentleman resident, describing what followed the shooting, said: "Myself and my wife went to bed, and some time later we were awakened by a tremendous knocking at the door which greatly alarmed my wife. We thought it was some persons intruding. On going down to the door, I found there two 'black and tan' policemen, with two children of the barber, James Lawless. One of the children was suffering from pneumonia and the other was an infant of not more than two years old. I took the two children upstairs and put them into my own bed as they were. I was told that the house of Lawless, the barber, had been wrecked, and this morning I learnt that Lawless was dead—that he had been taken from his house and shot, and also that a young man named Joe Gibbons, a dairy farmer, had been killed."

* * *

GOVERNMENT TO PREVENT REPRISALS

The *Pall Mall Gazette* last evening published the following telegram from Sir Hamar Greenwood, Chief Secretary for Ireland.

Monday
Dublin

There is no truth in the allegations that the Government connive in or support reprisals. The Government condemn reprisals, have issued orders condemning them, and have taken steps to prevent them. Nearly one hundred policemen have been brutally murdered, five recently in Clare on one day, by expanding bullets, resulting in horrible mutilation. In spite of intolerable provocation the police forces maintain their discipline, are increasing in number and efficiency, and command the support of every law-abiding citizen. The number of alleged reprisals is few and the damage done exaggerated.

(Signed) HAMAR GREENWOOD

* * *

If the ladies at the Majestic had needed something to improve their morale before, now, with the country "put to the fire and the sword," as Miss Johnston expressed it not without satisfaction, with "the troubles" yesterday at Balbriggan, tomorrow perhaps in Kilnalough itself, how much more they needed this something! Once again whist proved to be the answer. A couple of tables were started in the residents' lounge, although without the circumstance and the finery of the occasion in the writing-room. These tables rapidly became the centre of social life in the hotel; each player found a retinue of advisers and confidantes at her elbow providing a constant stream of conflicting advice and encouragement and when she became weary her place would promptly be filled by someone else. Within a day or two this epidemic of whist had taken such a grip that play began immediately after break-fast on the green baize tables (opportunely salvaged from the writing-room but dispensing, nevertheless, a faint odour of cats) and continued almost without interruption throughout the day and on into the night. There was an excellent spirit at these games: an air of gaiety and abandon, almost of recklessness, reigned over the chattering groups. By the end of the chilly autumn evening, with dampness and dark beyond the window panes, the hooting of an owl in the park or the lonely cry of a peacock, when one of the ladies irrevocably dozed off with the cards in her ancient arthritic fingers and there was no one at hand to replace her (which meant the end of the game, of course), one pair of players might add up the score and find that they were winning or losing by some prodigious number of tricks accumulated during the day, several hundred perhaps...And everyone would climb the stairs chuckling to their rooms and dream of aces and knaves and a supply of trumps that would last for ever and ever, one trump after another, an invincible superiority subject to neither change nor decay nor old age, for a trump will always be a trump, come what may.

Around these tables rumours continued to circulate and prosper. One day it was thought that a brigade of Cossacks, émigrés from Russia whose fiendish Bolshevists they no longer found it worth their while to quell, had been hired en bloc by Dublin Castle to subdue the Irish. Someone else announced confidently that a hungry mob in County Mayo had seized and eaten a plump Resident Magistrate; because this story, absurd though it was, happened to coincide with the actual disappearance of an R.M. (though not from County Mayo) it gave all the ladies a dreadful frisson and a kaleidoscope of bad dreams. But then the R.M. was discovered, in a coffin left on a railway line, and all was well. It said in the *Irish Times* that he had been buried and dug up again (reprisals had been threatened if his whereabouts were not made known), but there was no mention of cannibalism.

But while the ladies gossiped cheerfully and playing-cards continued to snow down on the green baize tables the Major was at his most despondent. Above all, he took a gloomy view of the reprisals at Balbriggan and elsewhere. The result of this degeneration of British justice could only be chaotic. Once an impartial and objective justice was abandoned every faction in Ireland, every person in Ireland, was free to invent his own version of it. A man one met in the street in Kilnalough might with equal justification (provided it fitted into his own private view of things) offer you a piece of apple pie or slit your throat. But given the way things were going (the Major could not help feeling) he would be more likely to slit your throat.

If no throats were actually slit in Kilnalough in the first days after the disturbances, there were, nevertheless, some ugly incidents. Miss Archer was rudely barged into the gutter by two mountainous Irishwomen clad in black and wearing men's boots. She then dropped her muff, which was trampled on and kicked around like a football by a group of urchins. Wisely she left it to them and fled before anything worse happened. Not long afterwards a young hooligan in Kilnalough put his stick through the spokes of Charity's bicycle, causing her to fall and graze her knees and palms. Stones were thrown at the people from the Majestic but without causing any great harm. Viola O'Neill, while buying buttons in the haberdashery (Boy O'Neill informed the Major), had had some obscene words spoken into her innocent ears which, naturally, she had failed to comprehend.

But presently the Major's sense of shock and dismay over the degeneration of British justice evaporated, leaving only a sediment of contempt and indifference. After all, if one lot was as bad as the other why should anyone care? "Let them sort it out for themselves."

He was bored, he was lonely, and one day he realized that Edward was getting on his nerves. The more the Major thought about this, the stronger his aversion grew. Strange that he had never noticed before how he disliked the fellow. These days the mere sight of Edward was enough to set him grinding his teeth. Everything about him was capable of awakening the Major's irritation: his overbearing manner; the way he always insisted on being right, flatly stating his opinions in a loud and abusive tone without paying any attention to what the other fellow was saying; and the unjust way in which he dealt with the twins, locking them up for telling lies when he himself was in the process of telling them, tyrannizing them unmercifully whenever the whim crossed his mind. But no less offensive were Edward's demonstrations of tenderness towards these same twins, the mildness and self-mockery that cohabited uneasily with his ferocity and conviction of always being in the right. "He's weak and sentimental," the Major would think on these occasions. "How can I have ever liked the chap?" Even Edward's clothes, the impeccable cut of his suits and the creases in his trousers, became an affront. "Don't you think that Edward looks like a tailor's dummy?" he remarked one day to Miss Archer as Edward sauntered past. Indeed, the only satisfactory thing about Edward was his evident liking for the Major.

“He can’t help but admire me because I did what his wash-out of a son should have done. What a joke!”

Perhaps it was inevitable that sooner or later the Major and Edward should have a row.

“The Black and Tans who sacked Balbriggan should be punished,” the Major said one day after he had glimpsed Edward and Sarah walking together on the terrace outside the dining-room. Edward looked at him, irritated and surprised—it had obviously never occurred to him that the Major might not approve of reprisals.

“Or perhaps you think that there should be one law for them and one law for other people?” went on the Major aggressively.

“But, Brendan, a man was killed in cold blood.”

“That’s still no reason for going on the rampage.”

“A man was murdered. These people have to be taught a lesson.”

“By all means let the culprits be taught a lesson. And leave law-abiding people alone.”

“Ach, they’re all the same. They laugh behind their hands when one of our chaps is killed.”

“That’s not against the law. Burning people’s houses is.”

“But how can the police possibly be expected to find who’s guilty and who isn’t when they’re all in it together?” shouted Edward, losing his temper. “Dammit, man! Be reasonable.”

“If they don’t know who’s guilty they should find out before going berserk and punishing people at random the way they did at Balbriggan.”

“I don’t want to hear any more of this. If you don’t care about the poor fellow who was killed doing his duty, I *do*!” And with that Edward strode away, clenching and unclenching his fists furiously. After a few strides he paused and shouted back: “Are you disloyal, Major, or what?” Then he departed without waiting for a reply.

Edward muttered an apology later in the day for this last abusive question and the Major, who was ashamed of himself, murmured sadly that that was quite all right, he hadn’t taken it to heart. Later the Major wondered why he should feel ashamed of himself. After all, he genuinely believed in what he had said to Edward.

“If the R.I.C. take to behaving as badly as the Shinners,” he remarked to Miss Archer, “pretty soon the whole country will be in chaos and it’ll be every man for himself.”

Later again the painful image of Edward and Sarah walking together on the terrace came to his mind.

“She’s a Catholic and he’s old enough to be her father,” he told himself sourly.

“This is no place for a young man to spend his time, surrounded by a lot of old women,” Miss Archer said to the Major with a smile.

“Yes, perhaps I shall still go to Italy...Florence maybe, or Naples. But I hear that travelling abroad is becoming impossible. All the papers one needs...not like before the war when all you needed was a ticket. But you’re quite right, Sybil. I must make up my mind.”

And yes, the Major was seriously thinking of leaving Kilnalough. Now that relations were strained between himself and Edward there was even less reason to stay. He could go anywhere in the world. He no longer had any ties, either in London or elsewhere. Yet this was precisely the trouble. In all the aching void of the world where should he go? Why should he choose one place rather than another? For wherever he went, Sarah would not be. Sarah would remain behind in Kilnalough.

The Major still had hopes, although now somewhat insubstantial, of establishing once more the intimacy which had existed between them during Sarah’s brief visit to London the previous winter. He still sometimes, at his writing-desk or in bed with a book open on his chest, fell into a reverie for minutes on end, day-dreaming delightfully about Sarah in the Strand with her arm through his, asking him questions, Sarah in a restaurant not knowing which knife and fork to use, sad and sweet, page after page of an old photograph-album...with himself at her side, amused, paternal, indulgent, and a tiny bit world-weary. He still had hopes.

She often came to the Majestic in the afternoon. He did not know what to make of her relationship with Edward: it was not as if she took any trouble to be alone with him. She seemed to enjoy the Major’s company just as much. Of course, the wide-eyed Sarah whose excitement at finding herself in a strange city he had found so touching was a very different person from Sarah in Kilnalough where she was so sure of herself. She was sometimes impatient with him. Sometimes, it was true, she laughed at him as if she found him ridiculous (he was still nettled by the thought of the bunch of roses and the chocolates). She enjoyed teasing him but she enjoyed flirting with him too, sometimes.

“You may kiss my hand, Brendan, if you want to very badly, as I can see you do,” she would say, laughing.

“Nothing could interest me less,” the Major would reply gruffly, laughing also but in a rather strained manner (he dimly divined that if he was to get anywhere he must refuse these tempting little offers, although the effort of doing so wore him out).

In front of the fire in the gun room stood an old leather sofa, a first cousin of the one in Edward’s study, buttoned and bulging like a sergeant major. Sitting on this one evening while Edward was away at the Golf Club, idly playing with a large family of new-born kittens that lived in the turf-basket, the Major suddenly found himself being kissed by Sarah. When they paused for breath elated thoughts sped through the Major’s mind like scared antelope. He was unable to speak. Sarah, however, merely remarked: “Your moustache has a

taste of garlic," and went on with what she had been saying a moment before about the races at Leopardstown. This comment staggered the Major but he said nothing. It was clear that he was a traveller through unmapped country.

On the other hand she was also quite capable of falling into a cold rage for no reason that he could perceive. At such times she could be very cruel. One day when he had been speaking, though impersonally, about marriage and its place in the modern world, she interrupted him brutally by saying: "It's not a wife you're looking for, Brendan. It's a mother!" The Major was upset because he had not, in fact, been saying he was looking for either.

"Why are you so polite the whole time?" she would ask derisively, while the Major, appalled, wondered what was wrong with being polite. "Why are you always fussing around those infernal old women? Can't you *smell* how awful they are?" she would demand, making a disgusted face, and when the Major said nothing she would burst out: "Because you're an old woman yourself, that's why." And since the Major maintained his hurt and dignified silence: "And for Jesus' sake stop looking at me like a stuffed squirrel!"

After one of these outbursts the Major might climb tragically to his room and in front of the mirror decide that it was all over, his hopes had been illusory. And then perhaps he would draft a curt note explaining that circumstances obliged him to leave Kilnalough never to return—debating with himself for half an hour whether one *could* actually say: "Circumstances oblige me to leave Kilnalough never to return," or whether it did not sound a bit foolish. Anyway, by the time he descended the stairs again, armed to the teeth with polite, coldly glinting words which would skewer Sarah's heart like a shish kebab, well, her mood would have changed completely. Without the slightest hesitation she would grasp his wrist and say that she was sorry, that she was a pig, that she hadn't meant whatever awful thing it was she had said. And no matter what stern resolutions the Major had taken five minutes earlier, he would allow himself to be mollified with indecent haste. Later he would be sorry that he had allowed himself to capitulate so quickly because, here again, he had dimly begun to perceive that it was poor strategy.

Until now, incredible though it may seem, the Major had never considered that love, like war, is best conducted with experience of tactics. His instinct helped him a little. It warned him, for instance, against unconditional surrender. ("Do with me as you see fit, Sarah.") With Sarah he somehow knew that that would not work. He was learning slowly, by experience. Next time he had a love affair he would do much better. But to the love-drugged Major that was not much consolation.

All the same, he had hopes, mainly of a practical nature. He was wealthy and independent. He had no relations to placate. Sarah was entirely without money; and about her "family" the less said the better, for even his present state of narcosis was powerless to furnish the unspeakable Devlin with attractive qualities. Could the girl refuse such a dazzling opportunity? Well, the Major gloomily fancied that she *could* —but all the same, and however undernourished, he did have hopes, in spite of everything.

While the Major, with neither chart nor compass, was thus wandering at large through the minefields of love, a letter arrived for him. He recognized neither the postmark nor the handwriting. "Curious!" he mused, and tore it open. It was from a girl he had known before the war. She said that she was going to get married and that she hoped he didn't mind. (Not only did the Major not mind, for a few minutes he could remember nothing about the girl at all; even the circumstances of their meeting escaped him.) But she had waited for him—that is, if at a certain stage he had made the right move, or rather (the letter was somewhat confused, as if written while intoxicated), any move...that is to say, it had become clear to her, after all one can only wait so long, but she would always think of him, would always remember him with love and affection...one can't, after all (why should one want to?), pretend that the Past hasn't happened...tear it out of one's life by the roots...the fun they had had together. She could close her eyes even now and still see him, Lieutenant Brendan Archer, as she knew he would always be. She hoped he would also. Life goes by so quickly.

The Major did remember her now, of course. She had been someone's sister, not particularly attractive but with a reputation among the young men of that circle. He was glad that she had managed to find a husband in spite of the reputation (which had turned out to be justified, he recalled). He had liked her, really. She had been a good scout, in spite of the other thing. She had oppressed him, though, by the intensity of her feeling for him, and that was the principal thing he now remembered about her. She had had a tendency to hug him violently, squeezing the air out of his lungs—it's distressing to be squeezed very hard if you are not trying to squeeze the other person back. One feels trapped. The Major had felt trapped. As to what had inspired this passion he had no idea; in those days, not long after leaving school, he had been an intolerably stuck-up young prig. Well, perhaps that was what women liked. Insufferable young prigs striking attitudes. "But no, I mustn't be bitter. And the insufferable young prig was *me*! That should make a difference." Well! But women liked other kinds of men too. The thought of Edward crossed his mind again. "Women have appalling taste in men," he decided gloomily.

The Major sat down then and there and unscrewed the cap of his fountain pen, thinking how strange it was that all this time a girl, whom he could still only think of as someone's sister, should have been harbouring fond thoughts of him and now, after so many years, should send him a letter saying she hoped he didn't mind that she was going to get married.

He wrote to her immediately. He said that *of course* he minded (after all, one could hardly say that one didn't mind in the least), but he hoped that nevertheless she would be very happy. In fact—he wrote, warming

to the task—in fact, he was positively gnashing his teeth with despair, but richly deserved to be passed over in favour of someone who was, without a doubt, a better man than he. It served him right—he wrote, feeling a flood of compassion for this other person wandering, like himself, at large in the minefields—that she should choose someone else and leave him for ever outside in the cold and clammy darkness. And, it went without saying, he would always cherish his memories of the good times they had had together. He remained, with devotion, her Lieutenant Brendan Archer.

He sealed this letter and posted it. As he retired to the residents' lounge to wait and watch for Sarah he wondered lugubriously how it was that the tyrant one moment could become the slave the next. Moreover, certain misgivings began to awaken. Had he not written with too much haste and warmth?

"My God, supposing she regards it as a counter-proposal, calls off the wedding and comes over here to get me!" He wondered whether he should not dash off another letter disclaiming the first. But no, he could hardly do that. Fortunately, however, the days passed without any word and it gradually became clear that he would not be held to account for his rash outburst of sympathy.

"At the first favourable moment I shall propose and the business will be settled one way or the other." But his efforts to lead up to the subject were constantly disappointed. It seemed as if Sarah could hardly hear the word "marriage" even in the most theoretical and general way without being seized by one of her cruel moods. Naturally the Major was dismayed, but persevered nevertheless, telling himself that it was just a question of finding the right mood.

One afternoon, sitting on a sofa in the residents' lounge and screened by an ornamental pillar, he almost brought himself to broach the subject. They were at the farthest extreme from the ladies playing whist by the fire. Sarah had been unusually warm and affectionate following a dire clash the day before (stimulated by some observations the Major had attempted to make about the Islamic wedding ceremony). For some moments they had been sunk in a contented silence, Sarah had idly slipped her hand into his, nothing was happening, she seemed rather sleepy. There was unlikely to be a better opportunity, so the Major cleared his throat.

"Look here..." he began (he had chosen his words days ago and knew them by heart). But at that moment a blue-veined, bony hand, fingers bright with diamonds, appeared from behind a bay tree in a tub (a refugee from the Palm Court next door, brought into the lounge on Edward's instructions so that it could "breathe"). The hand knocked rather sharply against the ornamental pillar, then caressed it. A moment later old Mrs Rappaport was standing there, her head on one side, listening.

"Is that you, Edward?"

"No, Mrs Rappaport, it's me, Brendan Archer."

"I could hear you breathing."

The old lady stepped forward; her other hand, dry and freckled, held a walking-stick. She advanced cautiously until she was standing beside the Major, looking down at him with her empty, unfocusing orbs.

"Angela's Major," she breathed, reaching forward with her free hand. "Where are you, my dear?" The Major frowned with annoyance but grasped her hand and guided it rather roughly (he was still keyed up from his attempt to propose) on to the top of his head, where it remained for some moments. He glanced at Sarah out of the corner of his eye. She was grinning at his discomfiture.

"Angela will be so glad you've come," the old lady murmured, and her hand, delicate as a moth, began to model the Major's features. "How handsome you are, Major!" she whispered, fingers spreading like cream over his forehead, rimming his eyes and returning to slither down his nose, smoothing outwards over the firmly clipped bristles of his moustache and on to the jawbone. She paused again, still holding the Major's chin lightly between finger and thumb, listening.

"There's someone with you. It's not Angela, is it?" Her hand left the Major's face and began to make slow sweeps beside him, reaping the air, nearer and nearer to Sarah. The Major got to his feet. Sarah was looking up at Mrs Rappaport with an expression of revulsion, mesmerized by the bony diamond-clad fingers that were groping towards her.

"There's no one there, Mrs Rappaport," the Major said abruptly, taking her by the elbow. But she shook off his hand and edged nearer to Sarah, her fingers still desperately trawling back and forth through the empty air. Sarah was shrinking right back now, holding her breath, unable to retreat further.

"Come along now. Let me show you to the fire." Grasping the old lady's arm firmly, he pulled her away, still clawing at the air. As they made their way across the lounge the corners of Mrs Rappaport's mouth came down and a single tear stole over her powdered cheek. When she had been deposited in her seat by the fire the Major hastened back to the sofa hoping to resume his proposal. But Sarah was no longer there.

The glass in the towering windows of the residents' lounge was already stained blue-black, but the ladies, engrossed in their interminable game of whist, had not yet thought to summon Murphy or one of the maids to draw the curtains and stem the tide of night seeping into the room. Far overhead, beneath the white ceiling encrusted with plaster roses, laurels, fleurs-de-lys and three-pronged crowns, a trapped sparrow fluttered helplessly from one darkening pane to another. Deep in an armchair, the Major, no less helpless, pondered Sarah's bizarre behaviour. That afternoon she had been even more taunting and capricious than usual. In

particular she had let fall two remarks which he was finding difficult to interpret: “I should be mad about you, Brendan, if we had more in common,” and a few minutes later: “Who should I like to marry? I should like to marry someone just like you, Brendan, only with brains.” Should these remarks be regarded as increasing or decreasing the chances of his proposal being accepted?

He sighed. Soon it would be time for dinner. He attempted to decide whether he was hungry or not, but even the answer to this question eluded him. Compared with his feelings for Sarah all his desires were tepid. Cries and laughter at some incident at the whist-table awoke the echoes of the cavernous room. The sparrow fluttered out once more to beat against the dark glass. There was silence then, except for the beating of its wings and presently a rapid, heavy tread that the Major had come to recognize at great distances. He pictured the gleaming leather shoes with dove-grey spats which were making the tiles of the corridor ring louder and louder. In a moment Edward’s massive and elegant frame (“the tailor’s dummy,” as the Major was in the habit of describing him these days)—silk tie and snowy shirt, silk handkerchief in top pocket—would make its appearance. Edward would smile mechanically in the direction of the ladies, who would probably be too busy to take any notice of him; maybe he would add a puzzled frown in the direction of the Major, as if to ask: “What ails the fellow?”

But Edward’s collar was hanging by a thread and completely divorced from his tie, the knot of which had shrivelled to the size of a raisin. His shirt was ripped and muddy; one lapel of his jacket had been torn out at the seam and hung to his waist; his trousers too were mudstained and the spat of one shoe flapped like a broken bird over the instep. The other shoe had lost its spat altogether. A bruise had swollen and darkened one of Edward’s prominent cheekbones; a trail of blood leaked from the corner of his mouth and there was a black congealed mass beneath his nostrils. He waved one closed fist at the Major, stared wildly about the room for a moment, then turned and departed the way he had come. The ringing footsteps started again in the corridor outside, now diminishing. The ladies had noticed nothing.

The Major got to his feet and hurried after Edward. He found him in his study, examining himself in the mirror with his back to the door. From behind, his jacket’s elegance was unimpaired; a rapid swelling and shrinking was visible below the armpits but there was no noise from his breathing. He heard the Major enter and turned, waving that same closed fist.

“Out for a walk,” he said harshly. “Two men tried to attack me.”

“My God! Where?”

“On the way up from the beach a mile or so away.”

“Here, let me get you a drink!”

The Major poured whiskey into a glass and handed it to Edward. He took it with trembling fingers and drank it rapidly, as if he were thirsty. He sat down then but stood up again immediately, pacing back and forth and still waving his clenched right fist threateningly in the Major’s direction.

“Did they want to rob you?”

“I’ve no idea. For all I know they were trying to kill me. It was odd...Not a word! They didn’t say a word. Neither threats, nor abuse, nor argument...Only heavy breathing and an occasional grunt during the scuffle. I couldn’t even see what the blighters looked like. There was a big man whose clothing was ragged and I heard something tear while we were struggling...and there was a smell of dirt and turf-smoke about him...but they all smell that way. There’s only one thing I know about him for certain. Come here to the light and have a look.”

Edward had paused, holding his tightly clenched fist under the oil lamp. Curious, the Major went over. Edward slowly opened his fingers—a tuft of red hair lay in his palm.

“That’s not much help,” he laughed. “I must know two dozen men with hair that colour around here.” Now that he was standing near to the light the Major could see that he was very pale. But he continued in a strong and cheerful tone: “Must have wrenched this from the beggar’s scalp. Didn’t realize I had it in my hand till I was back here.”

Far from getting better as time went on, the situation was plainly getting worse. Hardly a day passed now without some fresh instance of disagreeable behaviour on the part of the local population: a tradesman deliberately ignoring you in his shop, a child putting out its tongue at you without being scolded by its parents, a door that nobody thought of holding open for you, a seat that nobody offered you while you were waiting to be served...Trivial things, perhaps, but when one thought of how obliging the people of Kilnalough *used* to be! In short, it became wearing for the nerves. Who could blame Miss Staveley for delivering a long, rambling rebuke to the sniggering shop-girls of Finnegan’s?

The ladies from the Majestic no longer ventured into Kilnalough alone these days; one was too vulnerable to insult. If anything was needed, a few ounces of wool or a jar of peppermints, perhaps, or something from the chemist’s—smelling-salts or senna pods or lavender water—the problem was discussed over the whist-tables and an expedition was mounted. Six eyes, of course, all sharply on the look-out, proved far better than two for spotting insults while in the drapery or the tea-rooms, three tongues far better than one for putting someone back in his place.

In no time at all the ladies developed a remarkable skill for discerning traces of insulting behaviour in the

townspeople. A lack of respect would be detected (in a turned back, in a “saucy” smile, in a cheeky “Good day!”) and quick as a flash it would be dealt with. Miss Johnston rapidly established herself as the champion in both detection and retribution and accordingly became the most sought-after person to accompany shopping expeditions. Miss Bagley and Miss Staveley were also reliable performers. Miss Archer and Miss Porteous however, were frankly not much good; the latter was particularly erratic in detection and tended to become incoherent with rage once she was aroused. As for poor Mrs Rice, she was completely hopeless.

“She wouldn’t notice if someone called her an old aitch...ee...en to her face,” sighed Miss Johnston. “We shall simply have to make sure she isn’t left alone.”

One afternoon the Major happened to accompany an expedition which included Miss Devere, Miss Johnston and Mrs Rice, all of whom had some business to conduct at the post office. He was astonished by the speed with which battle was joined. Half-way across the bustling market square, without a moment’s hesitation, Miss Johnston locked antlers with a craggy-faced old farmer whom she had observed spitting on the ground some twenty yards away with obvious reference, she said, to herself and her companions.

“Oh really!” protested the Major. But Miss Johnston was already berating the surprised farmer and even waving her umbrella in his face in a threatening manner. Later there was more trouble when a clerk at the post office spoke to her with his hands in his pockets.

It didn’t take long for the Major to perceive that the ladies found these expeditions a source of rare excitement. Almost every afternoon a party was formed to go and buy something in Kilnalough. Those left at the whist-tables would await the return of the shoppers with eager anticipation, and rare were the afternoons when the returning ladies had no encounters to report. The Major was dubious about most of these alleged insults. Miss Johnston, in particular, stimulated by the admiration of her companions, already appeared to have refined her skill to the point where she could sense an insult before it was delivered. He suspected that, as with the unfortunate farmer in the market square, she very often administered correction to entirely innocent passers-by.

One day, genuinely alarmed by their immoderation, he permitted himself to suggest to the ladies that this “lack of respect” was more imagined than real...but that if the shopping expeditions continued to behave like war-parties there really *would* be trouble. The ladies received this suggestion coldly, but perhaps it had some effect. In his company, at any rate, the subject was brought up less often. It had never been mentioned, except obliquely, when Sarah was present. Dimly he was beginning to realize that the old ladies of the Majestic had little affection for her.

The Major had grown weary of whist, although the fever for the game showed no sign of relaxing its grip on the old ladies. Besides, the ladies themselves with their snobbish gentility and complacency had begun to grate on his nerves. Anyone would think, to see them whispering, that Sarah was nothing but a servant-girl! Not, of course, that individually they still could not be as charming as ever. All the same, one could have too much of a good thing.

These days he wanted to be alone in order to think clearly, more clearly, about Sarah. But where? His room was without comfort, the Imperial Bar overrun by cats, all the other rooms in the hotel (of which there was, of course, no shortage) seemed somehow wrong. He hardly knew why. There would be one thing or another which failed to please him. He would simply look at them and see that they were unsuitable, hardly bothering to detail the reasons to himself. But at last, on the second floor, he opened a door he had not tried before — and found exactly what he wanted.

It was a linen room, long and narrow and rather dark. Sheets and pillows lay in piles everywhere. Blankets, hundreds of them, were stacked to the ceiling against each wall; no doubt they had been there since the old days when every room in the place was in use. It was dry here, too, and rather warm, which was a great advantage now that the weather had turned chilly. At certain times of day it became positively tropical because the master chimney from the kitchens passed along one wall. But the Major did not mind; he would simply take off all his clothes and lie naked on a pile of blankets, reading a magazine and perspiring gently while he sipped a whiskey and soda requisitioned from the seething Imperial Bar. It was perfect. Nobody ever came here (except once when Edward, who must have heard a noise, poked his head in, gave a grunt of surprise at seeing the naked Major and withdrew hastily). In no time at all he had fashioned himself a huge, warm and slightly dusty nest of blankets and pillows.

As he lay day-dreaming in this nest he sometimes pictured Sarah (though without permitting himself any indecent reflections) lying there also, naked and gently perspiring like himself. How splendid that would be! He knew without having to ask that she would enjoy it as much as he. He understood her so well when she was no longer present; it was only when they were actually together that he experienced some difficulty. As time went by they would undoubtedly become more attuned to each other’s presence. In the meantime, particularly at equatorial noon and in the late afternoon (except on those days when the cook decided to send back to the dining-room, cut up cold, the unconsumed meat from yesterday’s dinner), Sarah lay there, delightfully insubstantial, naked and content by his side in the hollow of dusty pillows.

Once or twice, indeed, she even managed to be both in the linen room at his side and down below (flesh and bone, blood, cartilage, muscle, mucous membrane and whatnot) playing whist with the old ladies and perhaps with Edward too—for Edward, although some time ago he had forsaken the whist-table for the pistol-range come rain or shine, had recently suffered a relapse and was frequently to be seen shuffling and dealing

with no less fervour than the old ladies. But in general the fantasy tended to weaken and vanish in the vicinity of flesh and blood. Besides, the thought of Edward disturbed him. So when he knew that Sarah was there he would pull on his clothes and go downstairs to watch them play.

When Sarah was present Edward liked to play as her partner; “the old firm” he called it. They would both become very boisterous, greeting their cards with cries of mock grief or joy, encouraging each other to all sorts of extravagant behaviour. In this mood Edward often made the ladies roar with laughter and even towards Sarah they adopted a less frosty attitude. The Major would laugh at Edward’s jokes too, of course, but with bad grace. He seldom enjoyed himself. Only Mrs Rappaport, sitting grimly on her straight-backed chair by the fire, never smiled.

Mrs Rappaport would have cast a cloud over the proceedings, no doubt, if the whist fever had been any less intense—but one got used to her presence. Besides, she sat a little apart from the main group. One day, however, she did cause a slight stir and a few cries of dismay because it was noticed that another cat had magically appeared in her lap. Once again it was a mystery as to how it had got there. Normally everyone made a point of hunting cats out of the residents’ lounge with walking-sticks or parasols or whatever lay to hand, because one had to draw the line somewhere. Even more disturbing was the fact that the cat in question had the same marmalade fur as the frightful beast which had attacked Miss Staveley’s hat in the writing-room. Old Mrs Rappaport was blind, of course, so she could not possibly have selected it deliberately. The ladies’ concern might have been greater but for the fact that this cat was clearly not dangerous. Indeed, it was only a kitten—a tiny, mewing bundle of orange fur with its eyes barely open. If anything, it was a rather attractive little creature. One felt immediately that one wanted to stroke it. Some of the old ladies did so, bending stiffly to fondle its tiny ginger ears, and if the kitten promptly reacted by gripping these loose-skinned, jewelled fingers with the miniature needles of its claws, why, any healthy kitten would do the same. “It’s only natural,” said Miss Bagley, “and hardly hurts at all.”

All the same, it did have one faintly disturbing quality: namely, the speed at which it was growing. It was almost as if during the night someone picked it up by its wisp of a black-and-orange-ringed tail and blew a deep breath into it, inflating it like a gaudy balloon. With each day that passed it appeared a little more swollen and when it stretched and yawned the span of its claws reached a little farther. Moreover, when its eyes were more fully opened it was remarked that they were of a bitter, sea-green hue. Grim and impassive Mrs Rappaport sat there day after day with the kitten under her palm swelling into a...well, into a cat. Nobody took much notice of either of them; Edward had become so amusing these days, almost like a comedian.

The Major envied him. No matter how grey the afternoon, no matter how despondent the whist players had become about the state the country was in, Edward had only to sit down at the table for five minutes and everyone would be shouting and laughing, their ailments and prophecies of disaster forgotten. A current of energy accompanied him. When he left the table it was as if all the lights had been turned out. He dominated everyone, even the indomitable Miss Johnston. One could hear his voice three rooms away. His cheerfulness rattled the window-panes. He was like the ring-master of a circus: not one of the old ladies would be allowed to sulk or sink into herself. Miss Devere or Miss Bradley might try to resist him, remembering a loved one who had died on that particular day, perhaps, or thinking of the onset of winter, but...Crack! The whip of Edward’s massive personality would sail out across the ring and tickle her into action once again. Crack! Even the Major was forced to go through his paces or appear impossibly surly. He might be thinking: “I’m stronger than Edward because he can’t help admiring me whether he likes me or not...” but then, crack! He would find himself having to jump through a blazing hoop.

But still the Major was convinced that he was stronger than Edward. It was simply that Edward was so hearty and extroverted these days (but the Major had not forgotten the days when he was moody) that he made the Major seem dull and cautious by comparison. “It’s all show,” the Major would think lugubriously as he noticed that Sarah’s glistening eyes seldom left Edward’s face. But then, crack! It would happen again. He scarcely had time to build up his animosity before he would be forced to laugh grudgingly at whatever Edward was saying. “Very funny!” he would mutter to himself. “But we shall see...” Once or twice since the day that Edward had been set upon in the dark the Major had seen a hint of uncertainty in his eyes, he was sure of it. “We shall see what we shall see.” And to his surprise he found that he was grinding his teeth. “Good heavens, the fellow is my friend after all,” he reproved himself.

“If I haven’t an ace in this hand I’ll eat my pipe,” cried Edward. And sure enough he pulled out a pipe and wolfed it in a flash. The ladies shrieked and gasped in pain, holding their ribs, so funny did they find this (the pipe, of course, had been made of liquorice). The Major watched them with dismay, afraid that Edward might give them all heart attacks. But in between these humorous sallies the Major more and more often believed he could discern a lost and frantic look on Edward’s face. Sarah too sometimes stared at him with concern when she was not laughing at his antics. But then Edward would leave the room to attend to some business and everyone would feel dull and dispirited once again.

“It’s a scandal!”

Silence fell immediately, an absolute silence in which everyone held his breath and the throbbing purr of the kitten could be distinctly heard. Mrs Rappaport had gone unnoticed for such a long time that they had almost forgotten that she could speak.

“You think that I don’t know what’s going on in this house,” shouted the old lady, her jowls quivering with

fury. “I shall not stand for it under this roof!”

The Major expected Edward to soothe her as he usually did, to ask her what was the scandal, what it was that she wouldn’t stand for. But he said nothing. His eyes remained on the table. Nobody said a word for two full minutes. There was no movement except for the flicking of the kitten’s ringed tail on Mrs Rappaport’s lap. But at last her shoulders drooped, she sniffed and felt for the handkerchief tucked into her sleeve, her face went vacant once more. She had forgotten about her scandal, whatever it was.

But her outburst had a strange effect on Edward. He became morose and taciturn. Not only did he stop making jokes and infecting the ladies with hilarity, in a day or two he stopped playing cards altogether. Without any warning he abandoned the field to the Major. The Major was pleased, of course, since this meant that he could exercise his more subtle charm on Sarah without impediment, but somehow disturbed as well. Edward had begun to drink more than was good for him. More than once the Major had caught a whiff of liquor on his breath. One day he heard that Edward had been drunk at the Golf Club. He had got into an argument with one of the members and told him he was “worthless.” Of course such things happen from time to time and a man in his cups is not to be taken seriously. But then, perhaps a week later, it happened again, this time at the Majestic. Edward, impeccably dressed as ever but with his mane of grey hair in disorder and a glass in his hand, confronted Mr Norton in the corridor and told him he was “worthless.” Mr Norton fled indignantly to the residents’ lounge but Edward, glass still in hand, followed him there and, although he did not say anything, stared at Mr Norton with a sarcastic smile, looking himself (as Miss Porteous later put it) like “The Wreck of the Hesperus.” Presently, however, he tired of Mr Norton and, slumped in an armchair, stared balefully at the Major.

“Always playing cards with the ladies, Major?”

“That’s right, Edward.”

“Fine occupation for a young man.” The Major said nothing.

“I said it was a fine occupation for a young man.”

“I heard you.”

“Well, I take it you agree with me.”

“Edward, please!” Sarah said. She had become very pale. She stared at Edward anxiously. The other ladies had become as quiet as mice.

“I’m sure *you* think it’s a good idea to have young men playing cards with you,” Edward said harshly. “I want to hear what the Major thinks.”

“Very well,” the Major said curtly. “I think it’s better than being in the trenches. Does that answer your question?” With that he put down his cards, got to his feet and strode out of the room.

* * *

SOUTH AFRICAN AFFAIRS

The Union of South Africa is passing through a period of stress and danger. On Saturday last serious rioting broke out in Port Elizabeth...The police showed admirable restraint but were powerless to cope with the frenzied crowd of maddened natives. Military came on the scene and opened fire, killing several of the rioters ...Every effort is being made to localize the trouble, but, in view of the fact that in the whole Union there are only one and a quarter millions of white people as compared with four and a half millions of natives, the possibilities of widespread disturbances cannot be ignored.

The dangers of a native rising are much greater than they would be if the white population were united... To the Kaffir, Boer and Briton, Nationalist and Unionist, German and South African, are alike. There is not a white man in South Africa who does not recognize to the full the perils that lie dormant in the niggers’ kraals. There is not a white woman from the Congo to the Cape who does not shudder at the thought of a native rising, and there is hardly a native in the country who would not rise tomorrow if he dared.

* * *

THE CAMPAIGN OF CRIME

The guerrilla warfare against the forces of the Crown has become general outside North-East Ulster. Already the R.I.C. has suffered as heavily as if it had held a front-line trench in France. Its efficiency is maintained only by its own indomitable spirit and by constant reinforcements...The last three days have produced a truly appalling orgy of blood-stained lawlessness. In different parts of the country policemen have been assassinated and soldiers killed in ambush; every Irish newspaper has been turned into a catalogue of horror.

* * *

It was now that the first of the great autumn storms began to blow. The wind whistled in the chimneys and

immense breakers rolled in to smash against the sea-wall, kicking clouds of white spray high into the air. Spray drenched the gravel paths and dashed against the squash court, so that Edward was in a state of constant anxiety lest his piglets (now as big as spaniels) be drowned. A great quantity of rain-water collected on the sagging flat roof of the Prince Consort wing and presently it relaxed under the pressure, allowing a cascade to empty itself with a musical roar into a grand piano which had been left open and on its side, with one leg amputated. By this time, in any case, the Auxiliaries billeted at the Majestic had removed to a barracks at Valebridge, either because the accommodation there was superior or because they judged the hotel indefensible.

"There are a devil of a lot of people about," Edward remarked to the Major as they motored out to the golf links. "Something must be up."

There was a high wind, almost a gale, howling over the countryside, but the rain had abated. The roads were thick with people and vehicles, ponies and traps, carts with giant lumbering horses in the shafts, even some battered motor cars—passengers crammed inside and out, on the bonnet, on the running-board, even on the roof—bicycles pedalling in and out or way up on the grass verge with bells ringing—and hundreds of people on foot. It might have been an annual fair or point-to-point; but there was no talking or laughter, no singing, these crowds moved in silence, like refugees the Major had seen moving back from the Front.

"What a rabble!" he thought unsympathetically. He hated the Irish. He stared at the faces that floated by as the Daimler inched its way through against the tide of humanity sounding its horn. Dull, granitic faces, cheekbones sculpted like axe-handles, purple cheeks and matted hair, bovine, the women huge and heavy-breasted, arms dimpled and swollen like loaves of bread. But no, they did not look like refugees; in their faces he read a strained, expectant look. Something was up. The Major shouted at a toothless old man dangling his legs on the back of a cart to ask him what it was all about. But the fellow did not seem to understand, merely touched his forelock and looked away furtively.

"Yes," he was saying to Edward, "I've written to Cook's to ask about hotels in Florence, but I may move farther south."

Edward's face darkened, as if he were thinking: "Disloyalty!", but he said nothing. The Major listened to the echo and re-echo of his own words and thought how false they sounded, how hollow! He no longer had the will-power to leave Kilnalough without Sarah; all he could do now was allow himself to drift with the tide of events. Some strange insect had taken up residence in the will-power of which he had always been so proud, eating away at it unobserved like a slug in an apple.

At the golf links they heard about the miracle. Nobody was out playing golf and for once there were no caddies to be found. But the Members' Bar was overflowing and there was an unusual air of excitement, with much laughter and joking. Only that corner of the bar where the Auxiliaries were normally to be seen remained empty. They'd gone off to perform a miracle of their own, someone said.

Boy O'Neill told them what had happened. Late on Saturday night a young seminarian, kneeling in front of a crucifix in prayer, had seen drops of blood flowing from the wounds of the Christ-figure. For a number of hours he had remained there in a state of ecstasy, unable to speak or move.

This miracle was clearly anti-British. Some member of the seminarian's family had been accused of complicity in the ambush of an R.I.C. constable. It was said in Kilnalough that the lad's family had been abused and threatened, dragged out of their cottage by the Tans and lined up against a wall as if to be shot; his sister had been made to dance in her night-shift in front of her father while the Tans made lewd remarks and jeered at her. Under such provocation of devout people a miracle was only to be expected.

"What d'you make of it, Boy?"

"Mumbo-jumbo."

"Of course it's mumbo-jumbo, that's obvious...What I mean is: are the beggars going to cause trouble? God knows, things are bad enough already without having a holy war on our hands."

"Och, it's just a bit of nonsense. In a day or two they'll have forgotten about it. But look who's just come in, Ted. You'd have thought he'd be spending the day on his knees in front of the miracle."

The Major turned. Mr Devlin had just come in and was standing uncomfortably at the door, smiling ingratiatingly in the direction of a group at the bar who, by accident or design, had turned their backs on him. Sarah was standing beside her father. For a moment her eyes met the Major's but her face remained expressionless. Mr Devlin, in turn, caught the Major's eye and began to make frantic signals of respectful greeting: would he be permitted to join the Major and his companions and perhaps have the honour of purchasing them a refreshment? The Major nodded curtly.

O'Neill said: "I do believe the awful fellow is coming over here."

"I invited him," the Major said coldly.

"Well, well, you don't say..."

Sarah, sullen and with downcast eyes, hesitated for a moment before accompanying her father. She barely moved her lips in response to the Major's greeting. Captain Bolton had come in silently behind the Devlins and followed them over to where Edward, O'Neill and the Major were standing. Boy O'Neill, meanwhile, was maliciously asking Mr Devlin what he thought of the miracle. Did he agree that it was mumbo-jumbo? Mr Devlin said cautiously that he really didn't know what to think, it was such a strange business.

"But you'd better believe what they tell you to believe, Devlin, isn't that right? Or else the priest will send

you to hellfire, eh?" O'Neill, barking with aggressive laughter, was somewhat drunk, the Major realized. "So you don't think it's mumbo-jumbo then?"

Well, of course, in such matters one would want to be careful, because there was perhaps more to it than met the eye, at least, to his way of thinking...

"To your way of thinking but not to mine. If you ask me it's a plain case of hysteria."

"Well now," began Devlin helplessly, "I'm not sure about that..."

"If there's hysteria it's because innocent people are having their houses burned down," burst out the Major suddenly.

Bolton said: "There are no innocent people in Ireland these days, Major. If you put on a uniform like this you'll find that everyone's your enemy."

There was silence for a moment. Then Bolton added: "If any of you are brave enough to be seen with a man in the uniform of the Crown perhaps you'd care to come out to the seminary with me. I'm afraid that the Shinners are using your miracle to do some rabble-rousing with. It's a strange feeling to be in the middle of a crowd of innocent people, Major, any of whom may instantly become a hero by pulling a gun from his pocket and shooting you in the back without fear of being caught...How about you, Mr O'Neill? Would you like to come with me?"

"I'd be delighted any other time, but I've arranged to meet my wife."

"Too bad." Bolton smiled faintly.

There was silence for a moment. Sarah had at last lifted her eyes and was looking with amusement from one face to another. Bolton's eyelids drooped sleepily.

"Of course I'm probably exaggerating the danger," he added indifferently. "There may not be a single person with a gun in the whole crowd." He paused again and his eyes flicked towards Edward. "How about it, Mr Spencer?"

"I really can't see the point in taking foolhardy risks," Edward said harshly. "That's the first thing they teach you in the army."

"Of course. You're perfectly right. All the same, the Major here is an army man and I'm sure he'll want to come with me." Bolton was smiling contemptuously once more. Without turning towards her the Major was aware of Sarah's eyes on his face.

"Certainly," he said. "I'm ready to go whenever you like."

The wind that had been blowing since early morning continued without slackening throughout the afternoon, a solid rushing of air that kept the branches of the trees pinned back and combed the grass flat on the hill-slope where the Major was standing. The wind sifted through Captain Bolton's short fair hair and ballooned the jacket of his tunic as he sat on a shooting-stick, peering through binoculars. His wind-swollen shoulders gave him the appearance of a hunchback. After a moment he dropped the binoculars, removed the leather thong from round his neck and, without a word, handed them to the Major. The Major raised them to his eyes and looked down the slope towards the sea.

"Funny thing," Bolton mused. "I never cared much for the Irish even before all this. An uncouth lot. More like animals than human beings...used to make me sick sometimes, just watching them eat."

The Major had by now focused the binoculars on the seminary, which stood beside a rocky promontory. The crowd had assembled in a meadow in front of the grey stone campanile, whose bell, moved by the wind, struck an irregular, querulous chime, scarcely audible at this distance.

"I hope they all get rheumatism from kneeling in the wet grass."

"They're standing up again now. A young man is making a speech by the look of it."

"Let's have a look." Bolton took the glasses, looked through them briefly and handed them back.

Even though earlier in the afternoon he had seen the roads packed with people and carriages, the Major was astonished by the size of the crowd. With the foreshortening of perspective the heads seemed to be piled one on top of another. A number of women stood on the fringes of the crowd and three or four carts in which invalids lay propped on mattresses had been dragged over the rough ground to the front of the seminary so that they could hear the speaker. At the upper windows of the seminary building white-faced boys craned to hear, grasping the heavy iron bars for support, while on the steps a group of black-skirted priests stood and stared and cupped their ears into the rushing gale of air. The young man now stood way out by himself on a jetty of rock that ran some distance into the sea.

He had a strong jaw above a thick, muscled neck in which the Major imagined he could see veins starting out, bulging furiously as the mouth opened and closed to articulate his soundless words of rage. He stood on a level a little below that of the listening crowd and the wind from the sea blew his matted hair forward over his face.

"Are we going down there?"

"You can go if you like, but I prefer not to get a bullet in the spine if I can help it." Bolton stared mockingly at the Major and then went on: "I get fed up, you understand, with all the heroes in the Golf Club. You must excuse me for not being able to resist calling their bluff from time to time."

"I see."

“Sarah Devlin was telling me the other day what a fine man Edward Spencer is. A man of courage and principles who would never be capable of a cowardly or unworthy act—a real gentleman, in fact. She compared him favourably with me, a ruthless and unprincipled fellow whose men harass innocent people, burn their houses and destroy their property as the whim takes them.”

“What she says is true, isn’t it?”

Bolton smiled and picked up a dry twig, snapping it thoughtfully into small pieces between his fingers. “I do whatever the situation requires, Major. What I tried to explain to Sarah was that people like you and Edward can only afford to have fine feelings because you have someone like me to do your dirty work for you. I become a little upset when people who rely on me to stop them being murdered in their beds start giving themselves superior moral airs.”

“As a matter of fact I think you’re wrong about Edward. If anything he supports reprisals.”

“Perhaps, but without dirtying his own hands with them. That makes all the difference.”

The Major raised the binoculars and gazed once more at the young man on the rock jetty, wondering what he was saying to the crowd. Behind him as he spoke great towering breakers would build up; a solid wall of water as big as a house would mount over his gesticulating arms, would hang there above him for an instant as if about to engulf him, then crash around him in a torrent of foam.

“He looks a wild young fellow,” the Major said as he handed the binoculars back. Before turning away he watched another huge wave tower over the young Irishman, hang for a moment, and at last topple to boil impotently around his feet. It was, after all, only the lack of perspective that made it seem as if he would be swept away.

By the following morning the wind had dropped and mild autumnal sunshine bathed the old brick and woodwork of the Majestic.

With the milder weather the Major’s nest of pillows in the linen room became hotter than ever, almost equatorial in fact. It was impossible to open the window, which had swollen with the rain and been painted shut many years ago. The heat mounted. After a couple of hours of tortured reflection on his relationship with Sarah, his naked body glistening like a savage’s, he would be obliged to gulp down several pints of cold water. It was true that later, when the meal had been cooked and the stoves banked down for the night, the heat would drop to a more pleasant temperature—but by that time he had worn out his emotions, written two or three feverish letters with sweaty hiatuses on the paper where the ink refused to stay. In some of these letters, forgetting that he could not permit himself to be weak, he capitulated completely (“Sarah, I love you, you must come back to me, ah, the heat is intolerable”). But fortunately he mastered himself sufficiently never to post them, thinking: “She’d only think me a bit of an ass.”

“I shall never see you again,” he groaned aloud one afternoon, sitting high up on one of the blanket racks with a glass of whiskey and swinging his damp hairy legs in the air. But at that moment there was a knock at the door.

“Who is it?”

“Me. Can I come in?” came Charity’s voice.

“Certainly not.” The Major hastily jumped down and began to pull on his clothes. “What d’you want?”

“That girl wants to see you.”

“Which girl?”

“The one you all make such a fuss of. The one with the spots and the limp.”

“You mean Sarah? Tell her I’ll be down immediately.”

But Charity was still mooning outside the door when he opened it, and gave him a surly, reproachful look.

“How did you know where I was?”

“I saw you go in one day. What d’you do in there anyway?”

Although some days had passed since they had seen each other, Sarah seemed to be treating her visit as entirely normal. She greeted him as if unaware of the heartache that this separation had caused him. She was cheerful. She was delighted to see him. By herself she had been miserable. Why had he not come to see her?

“Eh?”

“I’ve been most horribly sick (ugh! It’s disgusting to mention such things). You might at least have come and cheered me up.”

“Was it an unmentionable disease?” asked the Major gaily, infected by her good spirits.

“All diseases are unmentionable, Brendan, but I shall tell you anyway. I spent a whole night vomiting. Isn’t that re-volting?”

The Major laughed, although secretly somewhat taken aback by this frankness. Of course Sarah was a law unto herself.

But she was irresistible. She chattered away gaily to him as they strolled arm-in-arm back and forth over the dusty floor of the ballroom. Yes, she had talked to Captain Bolton... What a strange, cold man he was! Those blue eyes of his! They said in Kilnalough that once he had glanced for a moment at a glass of water on Father O’Byrne’s table and ice had formed on it an inch thick...Oh, the Major was impossible! Of course it wasn’t true *literally*, it was true in some other way, how should she know in what way it was true? And, and...

the miracle, had he seen the miracle after that absurd little scene at the Golf Club? Well, she'd taken a peek at the statue and there didn't seem to be much blood flowing anywhere but there were a couple of brown spots...but *they* might have been anything, they might have been, say, oxtail soup. Oh well, if it was blasphemy to say so then so much the better, she'd have a sin to confess for once, which would make a nice change, her life was so dull...she could never think of any sins to *commit*, let alone confess, particularly when she felt sick and vomited all the time, it left her feeling much too weak to do any sinning...and anyway, since he, the Major, was a "beastly Prod," she didn't see why he should mind her saying something blasphemous, in fact he should positively encourage her, but never mind about that, what was it she wanted to say, yes, she wanted to know everything, absolutely everything that had been going on while she had been sick...

"You mean, going on here?"

"Of course I mean here. Where d'you think I mean?"

But the Major could think of nothing but the fact that he had spent three whole days hollow-eyed with love for her.

By now they were strolling in the residents' lounge, shielded from the curiosity of the whist players by a bank of potted shrubs which had been evacuated from the Palm Court by Edward.

"Take a look at this." Grasping a heavy plush sofa that stood in the middle of the room beside a table of warped walnut, he dragged it aside. Beneath, the wooden blocks of parquet flooring bulged ominously upward like a giant abscess. Something was trying to force its way up through the floor.

"Good heavens! What is it?"

The Major knelt and removed three or four of the blocks to reveal a white, hairy wrist.

"It's a root. God only knows where it comes from: probably from the Palm Court—one of those wretched tropical things. There's a two-foot gap between this floor and the brick ceiling in the cellars, packed with earth and gravel and wringing wet from some burst drain or waste-pipe."

"Why d'you think it wants to come up into the lounge?"

"Looking for nourishment, I suppose. There may be lots more of them for all I know. One shudders to think what it may be doing to the foundations."

"Poor Edward! Come on. Let's see if we can find any more suspicious bulges."

They set off immediately, walking from one room to the next, along corridors, upstairs and downstairs. In no time this looking for bulges became a marvellous game. They spotted bulges on the walls and floor and even on the ceiling. "Bulge!" Sarah would cry gaily and point at some offending surface. And then the Major would have to get down on his hands and knees or place his cheek against a cold wall and squint along it in order to adjudicate. Although a number of these bulges proved imaginary, once one started looking for them at the Majestic there was no shortage of genuine ones. Did some of these bulges conceal thrusting roots sent out by one or other of the ambitious plants in the Palm Court? Probably not. However, without digging up tiles and making holes in plaster it was impossible to be sure. Even so it was great fun. Sarah was in the most delightful, effervescent mood and in between bulges she chattered away with all sorts of charming nonsense. What would she do without her gallant Major? How brave he must be to have won all those medals in the war (*what* medals? he wondered, perplexed)! And had he ever in his life seen a more delicately shaped ankle than hers (leaning a hand on his shoulder and lifting the hem of her skirt to show him not only her ankle but her knee as well)? It came from having been a miserable cripple in a wheelchair all her life, which had stopped her getting ugly muscles like a dairy-maid. And she was lost, she said, in admiration of the Major's moustache, which made her think of a privet hedge she had seen in Phoenix Park. What a fine couple they made! she exclaimed as their twin reflections floated over a grimy mirror. What a fine couple! The Major laughed and laughed, as happy as a schoolboy. The afternoon passed delightfully.

Tired out at last, they sank down on one of the red plush sofas in the foyer and chuckled about the grey veil of dust that rose as usual, and about the clock over the reception desk which only told the right time, by accident, once every twelve hours. It was tranquil here, and oddly private, as public rooms often seem when deserted. By the foot of the stairs the statue of Venus glimmered in the subdued light.

Still chuckling, Sarah leaned over and kissed the Major, partly on his moustache then, more seriously and from a better position, on the lips. The Major melted, but cautiously, remembering the remark she had once made about his moustache tasting of garlic. They continued to kiss for a minute or two. Then Sarah sat up abruptly, disengaging herself. The Major straightened up also, to see what was the matter. She was looking over his shoulder with an expression of shock. He turned to see what it was.

Edward was standing a few feet away watching them. He had evidently come down one of the corridors, his footfall muffled by the carpet—but no, the floor was surely tiled, there was no carpet, they should have heard him coming; perhaps, even, Sarah had chosen this very place because one could hear people coming. Edward continued to stand there for the briefest of moments, his face expressionless. Then he turned and vanished, his shoes ringing clearly on the tiles.

Sarah hurriedly got to her feet. As the Major made to do the same she pushed him back and said sharply: "No, wait here for me. I'll be back in a moment." With that she hurried after Edward. The Major was left alone.

The foyer had become very silent. The Major got up and went over to peer down the corridor. It was deserted. He listened, holding his breath. Very faintly he heard, or imagined he could hear, the sound of

Sarah's voice. Then a door closed. He stood there for a moment or two, then went to sit down again. The minutes passed. Sarah did not come back. "Really, that's a bit thick."

He had been there for half an hour by now. The foyer was silent and peaceful. Nothing stirred. Nobody came or went. For a while he played hopefully with the thought that Sarah might have forgotten that she had said she would come back, that she was waiting anxiously for him in some other part of the building. But no, he had to abandon it. It did not hold water. So that was that.

He chose the corridor that led away from Edward's study and as he mechanically followed it he experienced a sharp craving for something sweet. There was a bar of chocolate in his pocket. He gobbled it rapidly. But the acid continued to eat into his soul.

In this unbearably sensitive state he took an unfamiliar route—through a grimy bar that no one ever visited, through a door like a cupboard that contained a flight of wooden uncarpeted steps. It was as if he had been skinned alive; the thought of contact with anyone was more than he could endure. The slightest banal word would produce a scream of agony.

The staircase took him up into a round, many-windowed turret, the floor of bare wooden boards, empty of everything except a carved lion and unicorn, worm-eaten and hanging from a nail. A strong smell of boiled cabbage hung in the air and somehow seemed to belong to the silence.

Another door led into a covered catwalk spanning thirty feet of empty air to another, identical turret. Below lay the dank, sunless remains of a rock-garden. The Major ventured circumspectly on to the catwalk, testing the wooden planks with his foot before putting any weight on them. There were no windows. Slatted trays of apples banked up from floor to ceiling allowed him barely enough room to squeeze through. The smell of apples was overpowering. He picked one up and, sniffing its wrinkled, greasy skin, somehow found this autumnal smell soothing. The turret at the end of the passage was as empty as its sibling. Steps led down from it on to an open veranda on which a man was standing, elbows on the iron rail, smoking a cigarette. It was the tutor.

"Hello."

The tutor turned towards him and nodded without surprise. He was wearing roughly darned plus-fours and a tweed jacket with pleated, bulging pockets which reached almost to his knees. Since the education of the twins had lapsed once more the Major could not remember having set eyes on him. He was seldom to be seen about the hotel. He ate his meals in some other part of the building, perhaps with the servants. Presumably he was still responsible for cooking the stew of sheeps' heads for the dogs. If he had other duties the Major did not know of them. In all probability he had been forgotten in this remote part of the house and lived his own life, waiting for better days.

"They come here every evening at this time," the tutor said.

The Major had joined him on the veranda and having had a look round now knew where he was. Below was a paved courtyard full of rubbish and dead leaves, although there was no tree in sight. Just round the corner would be the back door to the kitchens. Beyond that, on the other side of a wall, the dogs would be lounging, bored as the ladies of a harem, waiting for someone to come and give them some exercise. Immediately below the veranda yawned four giant, malodorous dustbins. A number of old women dressed in black were rummaging in these bins with fingers as gnarled as hens' feet, head and shoulders swathed in black shawls that concealed their faces.

"They're looking for food. They come up from the beach every evening when it begins to get dark—they can get in easily that way provided there isn't a high tide. I told Mr Spencer about it but he hasn't done anything."

The Major stared down at the moving black figures, smelling the aromatic scent of the tutor's cigarette. A shrill, incoherent argument had broken out between two of the women over a greasy newspaper containing scraps and bones. Watching them, the Major thought with despair: "She doesn't love me at all. She doesn't love me at all."

Below, the argument was at last settled. One of the women withdrew and, squatting on the ground, opened the newspaper to pore over its contents, counting them over and carefully examining the fragments of meat. When she had finished she stowed them in an empty flour bag before returning to the huge bins.

"If you ask me, the cook sometimes throws away perfectly good food on purpose. They can get away with murder if no one keeps an eye on them."

The Major nodded. His whole life would be spent without Sarah. Although it was now almost dark the black crones, oblivious of the Major's anguish hanging like a bitter fruit a few feet above them, continued to pick deftly through the rubbish.

* * *

THE PREMIER AND IRELAND

Mr Lloyd George, speaking at the Guildhall banquet in London last night, referred to the situation in Ireland. He said: "Before I sit down, if you permit me, I must touch on one of the few disturbed corners of the Empire. I am sure you will not guess what I am referring to (laughter)—Ireland (laughter). I hope

soon it will be less disturbed. There we witness the spectacle of organized assassination of the most cowardly character (Hear, hear), firing on men who are unsuspecting, firing from men who are dressed in the garb of peaceable citizens and are treated as such by the officers of the law, firing from behind—cowardly murder (Hear, hear).

"Unless I am mistaken by the steps we have taken, we have murder by the throat (Hear, hear). I ask you not to pay too much heed to the distorted accounts by partisans, who give detailed descriptions of the horror of what they call reprisals but slur over the horrors of murder (Applause). I ask the British public—I am sure it is not necessary to ask them—I apologize for asking them—not to be ready to credit the slanders on the brave men (Hear, hear) who at the peril of their lives are tracking murder in the dark (Hear, hear).

"I am told that the result of the steps we are tak-ing is that you have had more murders than ever in the last few weeks. Why? Before this action was taken in vast tracts of Ireland police were practically interned in their own barracks. They dare not go out. Terror was triumphant. We had to reorganize the police. But as long as men are in dug-outs the casualties are not as great as when they go out to face danger. And the police are going out seeking danger in order to stamp it out (Hear, hear). And believe me they are doing it. They are getting the right men. They are dispersing the terrorists.

"If it is necessary to have further powers we shall seek them (Hear, hear), for civilization cannot permit a defiance of this kind of the elementary rules of its existence (Hear, hear). These men who indulge in these murders say it is war. If it is war, they, at any rate, cannot complain if we apply some of the rules of war (Loud cheers). In war if men come in civilian clothes behind your lines armed with murderous weapons, intending to use them whenever they can do so with impunity, they are summarily dealt with (Hear, hear). Men who carry explosive bullets are summarily dealt with in war. If it is war, the rules of war must apply. But until this conspiracy is suppressed there is no hope of real peace or conciliation in Ireland and everyone desires peace and conciliation—on fair terms—fair to Ireland, yes, but fair to Britain (Hear, hear). We are offering Ireland not subjection but equality. We are offering Ireland not servitude, but a partnership. An honourable partnership, a partnership in that Empire at the height of its power, a partnership in that Empire in the greatest day of its glory." (Loud and prolonged cheering.)

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The Major should have left for Italy now, but he did not, of course. A letter arrived for him from Cook's answering a variety of questions about trains, hotels and steamers which he could no longer remember having asked. He dutifully read it through twice, but five minutes later he was unable to recall a single word. By this time it was almost the end of November. Icy draughts played around the rooms and corridors of the Majestic and sent their freezing breath up the legs of his trousers as he sat in the lounge.

After some deliberation he wrote Sarah a letter asking if they could meet some time to talk things over—but she did not reply. Presently, he wrote her another letter saying that whatever her virtues, constancy was not one of them (not that she had ever claimed that it was). The only conclusion he could come to, he concluded, was that she was simply a plain, old-fashioned flirt, which was fine, of course, if that was what she wanted to be. A little later he wrote yet another letter disclaiming the one before, which, he regretted to say, had been written in a spirit of bitterness. Neither of these subsequent letters achieved a reply, however, and he thought: "All I've managed to do is to have an argument with myself in these letters. She'll think me quite mad." And he forbade himself to write any more. At the very end of November, while getting dressed one morning, he became extremely depressed and one by one the buttons dropped off his shirt, like leaves off a dying plant.

This was also a bad time for Rover, who was gradually being supplanted as the favourite among the harem of dogs. By degrees he was going blind; his eyes had turned to milky blue and he sometimes collided with the furniture. The smells he emitted while sitting at the feet of the whist-players became steadily more redolent of putrefaction. Like the Major, Rover had always enjoyed trotting from one room to another, prowling the corridors on this floor or that. But now, whenever he ventured up the stairs to nose around the upper storeys, as likely as not he would be set upon by an implacable horde of cats and chased up and down the corridors to the brink of exhaustion. More than once the Major found him, wheezing and spent, tumbling in terror down a flight of stairs from some shadowy menace on the landing above. Soon he got into the habit of growling whenever he saw a shadow... then, as the shadows gathered with his progressively failing sight, he would rouse himself and bark fearfully even in the broadest of daylight, gripped by remorseless nightmares. Day by day, no matter how wide he opened his eyes, the cat-filled darkness continued to creep a little closer.

To share his place another dog had been summoned from the yard, a spindle-legged Afghan hound with pretty golden curls. Little by little this animal usurped the affection dedicated to Rover. True, he had some bad habits. If one managed, in spite of the draughts, to doze off in an armchair after lunch, there was a good chance of being promptly awoken by a warm wet tongue licking one's cheek—but some of the ladies did not seem to mind this. Besides, compared with Rover he smelled like a rose.

As December arrived, a curious thing happened at the Majestic: in a steady trickle more guests began to appear. There had always been the odd one or two coming or going; someone would be stranded in

Kilnalough and obliged to stay the night before going on to Dublin in the morning. But now the number of old ladies (and there were even one or two old gentlemen), was increasing noticeably. It was a little while before it dawned on the Major that what they were com-ing for was...Christmas! He could not help thinking that far from enjoying a merry Christmas they would be lucky if the place did not fall on their heads. Of course they probably had some idea what to expect. They had heard, perhaps, that the place was not what it used to be; but the habits of a lifetime are hard to break. So many people, now elderly, had banked their few warm and glorious memories of childhood at the Majestic that, even though they knew it was not quite the same, they somehow found it hard to stay away.

At first the Major would sometimes be on hand when they arrived (neither Edward nor Murphy nor any of the servants would be) to cushion the shock. But soon he realized that it was easier to stay away like everyone else. The new arrivals would sort themselves out somehow or other. In the meantime it was less embarrassing to keep out of their way. Still, the Major would give them a friendly thought as they stood in the shabby magnificence of the foyer beside their mountain of suitcases, probably in silence waiting for someone to come, listening, perhaps, to the heavy tick-tock of the clock over the reception desk (which the Major had wound as a token of welcome) and wondering, could that really be the time? (which of course it couldn't) or glancing with misgiving at the numbered rack of heavy room-keys which, ominously, seemed to be nearly all there—the only thing about the hotel that *was* all there, they might decide later, including Edward and the staff.

They would stand there looking round at the dusty gilt cherubs and red plush sofas and grimy chandelier and statue of Venus. While they waited uneasily for someone to come (for Murphy would have melted into the deepest jungle of the Palm Court at the sight of the carriage laden with heavy suitcases coming up the drive) they would taste the bittersweet knowledge that nothing is invulnerable to growth, change and decay, not even one's most fiercely guarded memories.

The Major's relationship with Edward had further disimproved, no doubt as a result of the kiss in the foyer he had witnessed. Not only was the Major jealous of Edward, but Edward seemed to be jealous of *him*, a fact which for a little while helped the Major to extract a little comfort from Edward's coldness. One day he received an unpleasant surprise, however, when Edward abruptly said: "Oh, by the way, Sarah's gone away for a couple of weeks or so."

"Oh, has she?"

"She told me to tell you. And to thank you for your letters."

The Major nodded calmly and turned away, but he was bleeding internally. He had been betrayed again.

Whatever satisfaction Edward might have got from tormenting the Major, he appeared anything but cheerful himself. He reacted, moreover, to the increasing number of guests by making himself scarcer than ever. Although his appearance for breakfast, and dinner in the evening, remained inflexible, he was now seldom seen for the rest of the day. On one occasion he murmured to the Major (perhaps he was momentarily ashamed of himself for sadistically revealing the fact that Sarah had confided in him about the Major's letters), as a sort of oblique explanation of everything, that he was devoting himself to his biological studies. The Major had already noticed the parcels of books and equipment that had started to arrive from Dublin. Once or twice he came upon Edward in a remote bedroom surrounded by books and papers. On another occasion he stumbled upon Edward's makeshift laboratory, set up in the bathroom adjoining the bridal suite on the first floor. Afraid lest Edward should think he was snooping, the Major backed out again quickly—but he had had time to glimpse a microscope on the table beside the bath of peeling gilt and black marble in which, no doubt, many a bride of the last century had washed away her illusions of love. Beside the microscope there was a litter of glass slides, a Bunsen burner, some jars containing a greenish fluid, a few sticks of rotting celery and a dead mouse. It was not clear whether the mouse had merely happened, by accident, to expire there or whether it formed a part of Edward's experiments.

The Major was concerned, not only because Edward had become moody and hostile and peculiar again, but also for more practical reasons. After all, it was not *his* job to run the hotel. But it badly needed to be run by somebody. If there was an increase in the number of guests arriving (which was bad enough, since nobody seemed to want them) there were also one or two defections among the regulars, which meant that life at the Majestic was really getting beyond a joke. The Major ventured to suggest to Edward that if any more of the regulars left they might well start a stampede which would leave the place denuded after Christmas.

"I say, do you really think so?" Edward asked, brightening for a moment. But then: "Some of them have nowhere to go, of course." He became despondent once more and turned back to the tome he was reading.

"Oh well, if you actually *want* them to go..." the Major replied crossly.

The thing that most worried the Major was that the Majestic was literally beginning to fall to pieces. Edward was making no effort to keep it in repair. The Major supposed that the way he looked at the situation (if he looked at it at all) was logical enough. After all, the hotel had over three hundred rooms. Even if half the building fell down he would still be left with a hundred and fifty—which was more than enough to house himself and the twins and the servants and anyone else who survived the strangulation of the hotel's trade. Meanwhile, no matter how much they might grumble, the residents adapted themselves remarkably well to the nomadic existence of moving from room to room whenever plumbing or furniture happened to fail them.

True, the amenities had gone from bad to worse (not that the Major really noticed any more). The foliage evacuated from the Palm Court now looked like taking command of the residents' lounge; the mirrors

everywhere had become more fogged and grimy than ever; the gas mantles which had until recently burned on the stairs and in the corridors had now stopped functioning, so that the ladies had to grope their way to bed with their hearts going pit-a-pat; the soup in the dining-room became clearer and colder as the days went by, and as the cook was left more and more to her own devices bacon and cabbage followed by baked apples appeared more frequently on the menu; outside in the grounds a tall pine keeled over and flattened a conservatory with such a terrible crash that two ladies (Miss Devere and a Mrs Archibald Bradley) packed their bags then and there; on the few remaining tennis courts a peculiarly tough and prolific type of clover continued its advance, so that if anyone had been thinking of playing tennis (which nobody was) they would have found that even the most firmly hit service would never rise more than six inches. But Edward these days had that far-away look in his eyes and if one of the recent arrivals went to com-plain to him he scarcely seemed to be listening, though he would nod his head rapidly and say from time to time, almost with eagerness: "I say, do you want your money back?" Or puffing at his pipe and looking at his shoes he would murmur: "Really, that is most unfortunate...Let me assure you that no charge will be made...I mean, none could possibly..." and his voice would trail off.

One unseasonably warm day the giant M of MAJESTIC detached itself from the façade of the building and fell four storeys to demolish a small table at which a very old and very deaf lady, an early arrival for Christmas, had decided to take tea in the mild sunshine that was almost like summer. She had looked away for a moment, she explained to Edward in a very loud voice (almost shouting, in fact), trying to remember where the floral clock had been in the old days. She had maybe closed her eyes for a moment or two. When she had turned back to her tea, it had gone! Smashed to pieces by this strange, seagull-shaped piece of cast iron (she luckily had not recognized it or divined where it had come from). Edward made a feeble effort to penetrate the submarine silence in which the old lady lived, muttering an apology and tugging nervously at his thickly matted grey hair. She wanted an explanation, she said, ignoring his words (which she could not hear anyway) but mollified nevertheless to see that his lips were moving and that his expression showed alarm. For a while she continued grumbling and it gradually emerged that her main grievance was that her tea had been demolished along with the table. It appeared that she had spent a good part of the afternoon shuffling along distant corridors trying to find someone willing to take her order for afternoon tea. In the end she had come upon Murphy taking a nap on a royal-blue ottoman behind a screen of ferns in a remote sitting-room (it was probable that he was the only person to know of its existence until that moment). He had been aroused by a poke in the chest from the heavy blackthorn that the old lady had brought with her to punt her frail body over the vast, dustily shining expanse of the ballroom. Unmanned by this experience, he had gone to make tea for her himself. After getting lost a couple of times on the way back, and stopping for a rest at frequent intervals, she had at last regained the veranda. And now this hard-earned tea had been pulverized by a twisted piece of metal which had apparently fallen from the sky! It wasn't good enough.

Edward ordered fresh tea and, anxiously looking up at the other letters clinging insecurely to the building, suggested that she might like to move her chair along the veranda a little to where there was a better view.

As a result of this incident Edward seemed to abandon whatever ambition he might still have nourished of running the place as a hotel. It marked, at any rate, the end of that period during which guests might consider themselves encouraged to come to the Majestic. He did not lock the gates, however, and a trickle of Christmas guests continued to arrive, unencouraged, to claim hospitality.

The Major, unfortunately, was unable to match Edward's indifference. He worried about everything, about the cats proliferating in the upper storeys, about the lamentable state of the roof (on rainy days the carpets of the top floor squelched underfoot), about the state of the foundations, about the septic tank, about the ivy advancing like a green epidemic over the outside walls (someone told him that far from holding the place together, as he had hoped, it would pull it to pieces with all the more speed). It is true that the Major's nerves were in a poor condition; he sometimes wondered himself if he wasn't being unduly alarmist—the Majestic had held up splendidly in all weathers for many years. Presently, however, a piece of stucco ornamentation the size of a man fell from the coping of the roof into the dogs' yard. A foot or two to the left and it would have squashed Foch, a long-haired dachshund.

Anxious to report this, he went in search of Edward. The laboratory had been evacuated from the bridal suite; Edward had set up his table in the very middle of the ballroom. One needed space to allow one's thoughts to expand, he explained. In the bathroom he had felt compressed, his ideas had been restricted, had refused to flow freely.

While the Major told him about the near-disaster to the dog Foch, Edward picked up the dead mouse and absent-mindedly began to squeeze its thorax between finger and thumb like a piece of india-rubber.

"Missed him, did it?" he remarked brightly. "Well, that was a stroke of luck."

"Hadn't we better get a mason in to look the place over?"

"That's a capital idea. I expect there's some johnny in Kilnalough who does that sort of thing. I'll get in touch with him."

That night the Major dreamed that he was in a dirigible. The captain and crew had fallen overboard, leaving only Mrs Rice and himself. Later Mrs Rappaport appeared in the uniform of one of the Bavarian line regiments, together with her marmalade cat, now as big as a sheep. Fortunately she took command and, after bombing Dublin, brought them down safely.

There was no sign of the mason. Instead, a plump and pretty girl wearing a straw boater over her stiff pigtails came wobbling up the drive on a bicycle. It was Viola O'Neill, come to play with the twins. The twins gave her a desultory kiss on the cheek and led her away upstairs. As she went her eyes lingered disconcertingly on the Major, who was standing in the foyer listening sympathetically to an old gentleman in stockinged feet. The Major watched her slender white hand trail up spiral after spiral of the staircase and heaved a melancholy sigh. "Why couldn't Sarah want me like that?"

"Do you have any idea where they would be?" the old gentleman asked crossly, not for the first time.

"Where what would be?" The Major's mind had wandered again. "Oh yes, of course, you've lost your shoes. I'll make inquiries."

The old gentleman, a new arrival at the Majestic, had left his shoes outside his bedroom door. Not only had they *not* been cleaned, they had disappeared altogether! And all his other shoes were in a cabin trunk that had yet to be delivered from the railway station. The Major left him in the foyer and went to ask Murphy to ask the maids.

Later in the day, while hunting languidly for the shoes along one of the upper landings, he opened a door and was greeted by cries of surprise and dismay: through a blue mist of cigarette-smoke he perceived three figures in petticoats. He closed the door again discreetly. He was shocked, however, and thought: "I must tell Edward. If those girls go on the way they're going...." But he was annoyed with Edward and did not see why *he* should have to bring up his daughters for him; let him see to it himself! Besides, young women these days...

The matter of the shoes was cleared up in the course of the afternoon. It seemed that the cook, on her way down to prepare breakfast, had noticed them outside the gentleman's door and had naturally supposed that he was throwing them away—a perfectly good pair of shoes! She had picked them up and given them to Seán Murphy, who had been digging energetically in them all morning.

At the end of the first week of December Padraig was also sent up to the Majestic to visit the twins, not by old Dr Ryan but by his father who, it turned out, was not only a staunch Unionist but something of a snob into the bargain. The Major intercepted Padraig (who was looking pale and anxious—it was clear he had little appetite for visiting the twins) to ask him about his grandfather.

"Oh, he's well enough. I don't see him so much now. He has a cook and a maid but he'll hardly let anyone into the house."

"Is he still not speaking to your parents?"

Padraig nodded. "He's very stubborn and bad-tempered.

"He's told my father he's a traitor to Ireland for approving the British the way he does."

"I didn't know he was a Sinn Feiner."

"Ah, you wouldn't mind him," Padraig said, his eyes flickering uneasily to the landing above, where three pretty faces had appeared over the banister. "He's very old."

"Well, here's your guest," the Major called up sternly. "I hope you'll look after him properly and behave yourselves."

Padraig mounted the stairs as if under sentence of death, was seized by the girls and whisked away. The Major went about his business.

Curiously enough, Padraig seemed to enjoy himself. He reappeared on the following day looking cheerful and confident, then again on the day after. Soon he became a frequent visitor. "It was probably just a question of breaking the ice," reflected the Major.

The Major's nerves were once more in a deplorable state. He could hardly bear to open the newspaper, for it seemed that the war, which he thought he had escaped, had pursued and caught him after all. Martial law was proclaimed in Cork, Tipperary, Kerry and Limerick. On the night of December 11th Cork was sacked by Auxiliaries and Black and Tans after a patrol had been ambushed. Reading about it, the Major was reminded of how Edward had once said to him that he would welcome a holocaust, that he would like to see everything smashed and in ruins so that the Irish would really taste the meaning of destruction. He read about the scarlet flames that lit up the night sky as the shopping district of Cork was set on fire: firemen's hoses cut by axes; uniformed police and military staggering through the flaming streets with looted goods; Auxiliaries drunk on looted whiskey singing and dancing with local girls in the smoke. It was said that the clock on the tower of the City Hall, rising out of an ocean of flame and smoke, went on striking the hour until dawn, when it finally toppled into the inferno below.

The Major's sleep was as short and disturbed as it had been during his convalescence in hospital, punctuated by nightmares which continually returned him to the trenches. Any sharp noise, a book clapped down flat on a table or a dropped plate, would have him ducking involuntarily like a new recruit. During the hours of daylight, unless he was in the open air or in the safety and warmth of the linen room, he felt himself compelled to keep moving from room to room, corridor to corridor, upstairs and down. Only now did he consider that this compulsion might stem from the irrational fear that a trench-mortar shell was about to land in the spot where he had been standing a moment before, invisible explosions that tracked him from the lounge to the dining-room to the library to the billiard room, on and on, perpetually allow-ing him to escape by a fraction of a second. "I must pull myself together or Edward will notice that I'm showing the white

feather."

He needed some distraction—a visit to the theatre. He consulted the *Irish Times. Charley's Aunt* was being performed at the Gaiety and the advertisement said that it was "Enough to make a cat laugh." But the Major dolefully suspected that it would fail to work on him. Besides, there was a special notice which said that the performance ended nightly at 9.15 p.m. sharp, and the idea of snatching a few quick chuckles before hastening home through the lawless streets did not appeal to him. All the same, he must take himself in hand. For an entire morning he forced himself to remain sitting in one place. The ladies, rebuffed in peevish tones, watched him from a distance and supposed in offended whispers that he had "got out of bed the wrong side." After lunch, when he had satisfied his most urgent craving for movement, he did his best to restore himself to their good graces.

Shortly before tea-time he was strolling, hands in pockets, along a corridor on the third floor (since putting his foot through the floor-boards he seldom ventured higher) when a door opened round the corner, releasing a gale of laughter followed by footsteps and a rustling of skirts. A moment later and he had collided with a slim, dark girl who came running round the corner, laughing over her shoulder. In the dim light the Major failed to see her until the last moment. He just had time to catch her in his arms to prevent her falling.

"I beg your pardon!"

The girl's laughter changed to surprise and dismay. She disengaged herself and stood back awkwardly. The Major peered at her in the twilight. She was wearing a charming dress of black velvet with a white ruff and white lace cuffs; from the ruff her neck rose, slender and flushed, to a delicate pouting face. A fragrant perfume hung in the air. Abruptly, she turned and fled back into the room that the laughter was coming from. There was some urgent whispering (it was the twins and Viola, of course) and then the hilarity became greater than ever. The Major, also laughing, put his head round the door. By this time he had realized that the "girl" was Padraig.

"Brendan, what d'you think? Doesn't he make a gorgeous girl?"

"We're all frightfully jealous of him."

Smiling (though still a tiny bit dismayed by the pleasure he had derived from touching "her" soft body a moment earlier), the Major agreed that black velvet suited Padraig to perfection. It was some time before the mortified Padraig could be enticed out of the adjoining dressing-room. Indeed, it took a great deal of cajolery from the girls and a hearty appeal from the Major before he would agree to show himself again. And then what laughter there was when Charity lifted the hem of his skirt to show the Major what slender, well-turned ankles he had! And his hair was so fine and curled so naturally that if he grew it a bit longer he wouldn't have to wear a wig at all! Besides, according to some magazine they'd been reading there were girls in London who had cut off all their hair and wore it short like men.

"So with his lovely soft hair..."

"And his skin and colouring..."

"And his dark eyes with their long lashes..."

"And my ankles, don't forget them," added Padraig.

"And his ankles, of course, we mustn't forget them, and his *hands*, just look how slender and white they are!"

"With all those things there's hardly any difference between him and a girl *at all*!" cried Viola enthusiastically.

There was a moment of silence after this remark, perhaps for reflection that there were, after all, one or two small but essential differences (although a well-brought-up girl like Viola might not be expected to know much about them). However, the general good humour was such that in no time at all everyone was bubbling over with laughter and compliments once more and Faith was showing the blushing but gratified Padraig how a girl should walk: this walking was more like gliding, the twins explained (and they ought to know, they'd been to enough different schools with enough deportment classes). They made him walk to and fro with a book balanced on the top of his head until he could move without it falling off. Padraig took to this with a splendid natural aptitude and soon they could safely balance a glass of water on top of the book without him spilling a drop.

Presently someone decided that Padraig should be taken on a tour of the hotel to see if any of the ladies recognized him. He should go on the Major's arm! What a brain-wave! But the Major turned out to be a spoil-sport and refused point-blank.

"Oh, oh, *why*?" pleaded the girls.

"Because."

"Because *what*?"

"Just because."

And there was no shifting him. Usually the twins could get round him without difficulty, just by telling him that they thought him handsome and interesting, that he looked like Alcock, say, or Brown. But this time, for some reason, he remained adamant. Well, never mind. They would take him on a tour themselves!

The Major, like the spoil-sport he was, tried to dissuade them, but he did not make his case very eloquently. He kept pointing out that although a joke was a joke, enough was enough, and that sort of thing. Padraig, he suggested hopefully, should put his clothes back on and then everyone should think of another, different,

game.

"But he's got his clothes *on*!" screamed the girls indignantly. The Major was *too* boring!

"Yes, I've got them *on*," agreed Padraig.

Were there any actual *reasons*, the girls wanted to know, enunciating carefully, as if to an idiot, why Padraig shouldn't be taken on a tour of the hotel? Well, yes, there were reasons, but they were so nebulous that the Major found it difficult to specify them. They were certainly not tangible enough to satisfy the girls.

So the tour got under way, Viola leading the way with long button-booted strides, displaying her pearly teeth like the principal boy in a pantomime. Padraig followed with a twin on each arm, chuckling or whispering into one ear or the other while he himself looked as radiant as Joan of Arc and prepared to respond to anything the situation might present.

And as it turned out, Padraig had an enormous suc-cess with the old ladies, which caused the Major to reflect that the twins were probably right: he was a stick-in-the-mud, a spoil-sport and a kill-joy. What a fuss they made of him! They patted his shoulder and kissed his brow and made minute adjustments to his wig, which was the only part of him that "rather spoiled the effect," they thought (it was a cheap theatrical wig stolen by Faith from some school dramatic society). They delved into their handbags and gave him chocolates to nibble that had that rather peculiar musty taste of perfume and moth-balls that old ladies' chocolates always have. It was wonderful, they thought, how he seemed to know what to do just by instinct, keeping his knees together and sitting up straight and so forth. They were so delighted with him, in fact, that they were loath to let him continue his tour and made him promise to come back. He agreed, of course, and came back quite soon.

The rest of his tour had turned out to be something of an anticlimax. With his retinue he had marched into the ballroom and wheeled several times round Edward's makeshift laboratory. But Edward was engrossed in assembling some extraordinary piece of machinery with pipes and tubes and an old clockwork barometer with graph-drum and inking-needle and pieces of rubber, evidently for some experiment he wanted to make. Consequently he paid no attention whatsoever. The maidservants, of course, smiled at him and showed their dimples, but they were too shy to speak to him, so that was no good. Curiously enough, Mr Norton showed no interest at all; he merely glanced up from his newspaper and raised his wicked old eyebrows. One had to assume that after his life of debauchery he must know the difference between Padraig and the real thing, so this poor reaction dampened their enthusiasm a trifle. Back to the old ladies, then, to have their confidence restored. All in all, and taking, as one must, the rough with the smooth, they had reason to be satisfied.

By now, unfortunately, it was time for Padraig to go home for his supper and so he had to get changed back into his other clothes. But he would come again on the following day; there were still lots of different dresses for him to try on—all Angela's clothes, in fact, which the twins still stoutly declined to wear. Viola had to go home too and said she'd escort Padraig back to his house. With all the excitement and amusement they had been having, with all the good cheer, one tended to forget that these days the roads could be dangerous.

Soon it was time for dinner at the Majestic and the hotel guests began to assemble in the dining-room. It was cold there. A stiff east wind was blowing off the sea and, filtering in through the cracks between the French windows, caused the heavy curtains to move back and forth like impatient spectators in the shadows. In the branched silver candlesticks the flames constantly sputtered from yellow to blue under the compulsion of draughts; the light they provided was supplemented by an oil lamp on each table. One could see one's breath against the surrounding darkness; the tureen of soup on the table belched steam like a locomotive.

The ladies waited, pinched and shivering in layers of shawls and stoles, fingers buried in muffs, crowding all together around the moaning fireplace in which huge, unevenly cut sods of turf blazed without warmth. Now and again a back-draught of pungent whitish smoke would drive the ladies back with averted faces, but somehow this puff of smoke ascending into the darkness, and the smell of turf-ash, made the room seem fractionally warmer. The fireplace groaned mournfully and everyone waited for Edward to come.

It was his habit to appear punctually at seven o'clock. Except when he happened to be away for the day the Major had never known him to miss attending the evening meal. This punctuality of Edward's was the very spine of the hotel: in a sense, it held the whole place together. Slates might sail off the roof in a high wind, the gas mantles might stop functioning on the landings, but Edward's appearance at dinner was immutable. Was there something wrong? An accident? At ten past seven one of the maids appeared with a note asking the Major if he wouldn't mind taking charge. Edward was busy. The ladies exchanged significant glances. It was one thing (said these glances) to be in the trenches with one's commanding officer, quite another thing to be there when one knew that he was toasting himself in front of a warm fire behind the lines somewhere.

While Angela was still alive the Spencers had eaten at a table separated by the width of the dining-room from the guests, but now, drawn together by death, growing chaos, and the advancing winter, everyone ate together at two long tables, Edward normally at the head of one, the Major at the head of the other. According to the ritual the Major now picked up the heavy handbell and rang it vigorously, before crossing to the small door concealed in the oak panelling. He held it open and waited for Mrs Rappaport to step out. She did so, followed by the marmalade "kitten" (now a powerfully built cat). Having taken hold of his arm, she allowed herself to be led to the table. In silence the Major helped her into her chair at the end of the table

nearest to the fire, tied a napkin round her neck and put a silver spoon in her hand. A stool had been placed beside her chair for the cat, which had recently become too big and cumbersome to remain on her lap while she was eating. Disasters had occurred; hot soup had dribbled on to its striped back; once while it was sleeping peacefully a portion of scalding shepherd's pie had slid off a fork and dropped like a poultice into one of its ears.)

The Major said grace and took his seat at the other end of the table.

"Where's Daddy?" whispered Faith.

Beneath his thick growth of moustache the Major's mouth shaped the words: "Busy. Eat up."

"Busy doing what?"

The Major frowned but offered no reply. It hardly mattered what Edward was doing. The important thing was that he had broken one of his own rules.

"Cheer up, Brendan," said Charity and reached under the table to pat his knee. The Major frowned more sternly than ever and, lifting a spoonful of tepid grey soup to his lips, drank it down with a slight shudder, like medicine. "He's broken one of his own rules," he thought again, not without a certain bleak satisfaction. "He's beginning to go to pieces."

Next day Edward was by turns impatient, irascible and resigned. His experiments were being baulked at every turn. The trouble seemed to be that Murphy, whom he wanted to perform his experiments upon, was being difficult.

"The man has no apprehension of the needs of scientific inquiry," he said. The Major noticed that look of mild self-mockery, which had so surprised him at their first meeting, pass fleetingly over Edward's leonine features. But then his face hardened and he added petulantly: "Pretty soon the bloody servants will be giving *us* orders."

"What exactly is this contraption?"

On Edward's table lay the partly dismantled graph-drum from the barometer. The inking-nibs had been rearranged to connect with a tangle of wires and rubber pipes; one of these pipes was attached to a glass funnel containing water and a wooden float, terminating in a deflated rubber balloon.

"I've been trying to reproduce some experiments Cannon made before the war on hunger and thirst. He was the chap who discovered that hunger-pangs come from a periodic contraction of the stomach. He got one of his students to swallow a balloon like this, inflated later, of course...then with each contraction the balloon in the stomach would be compressed, driving the air up along this tube, passing through the esophagus and in turn making the float rise by forcing up the water-level. Pretty ingenious, really. The trouble is that the wretched Murphy simply refuses to swallow the damn balloon."

"Ah."

"The point is that Cannon used a young man for his experiments. I wanted to see whether the average sixty-second period between contractions would be different in an old man like Murphy."

Hands thrust in pockets, the Major gloomily surveyed Edward's machine. On his table there was no sign of the dead mouse. Presumably it had been devoured by the cats during the night.

"I took a lot of trouble building this," Edward added with resentment. "One feels badly at being let down at the last moment."

"Look, Edward, I've been meaning to ask you about the mason. Did you ever get hold of him?"

"Who? Oh, yes, you're quite right. It went clean out of my head. Thanks for reminding me. I'll see to it today."

Edward frowned and got to his feet, picking up a glass measuring-jar which he tossed absently from hand to hand. Presently he said: "There's another experiment I'd like to try...one on thirst. There are lots of conditions that result in thirst apart from the simple lack of water—wounds, for instance. Severely wounded men very often complain of a raging thirst. The one that interests me, though, is the sensation of being thirsty through fear, the mouth going dry and so forth. There are lots of instances recorded but nobody has ever actually measured it to my knowledge."

"How can it be measured?"

"Just a question of measuring the amount of saliva available in the mouth in the normal everyday state and comparing it with the amount of saliva produced in a state of fear." Edward's face became faintly animated. "This might be a small but significant contribution to scientific knowledge. Of course Murphy's already deuced peculiar and one doesn't want to give him a heart attack..."

"Look, you won't forget about the mason, will you? We don't want the place to fall down."

"I'll see to it right away."

Unhopefully the Major wandered out of the ballroom, leaving Edward to ruminate.

Meanwhile the days were slipping away towards Christmas and still nothing had been done about decorations. The ladies became sulky and despondent at the comfortless prospect of spending the festival at the Majestic. Miss Staveley talked openly of going to stay at the Hibernian in Dublin where they knew how to do things properly. She might have gone, too, had it not been common knowledge at the Majestic that respectable ladies were being raped by Sinn Feiners every day of the week in Dublin; indeed, the aunt of

someone's friend had only the other day been violated by a Sinn Feiner posing as a licensed masseur. Miss Staveley had no desire to suffer a similar fate, so she stayed on at the Majestic, but with bad grace.

At length the Major decided that something must be done, so he took the twins, Viola, Padraig, and Seán Murphy into the park to collect holly and mistletoe, while he himself chopped down a puny and naked Christmas tree he had noticed near the lodge. At the sight of this activity the ladies cheered up and soon they were helping to make paper decorations. The residents' lounge became a hive of industry. Miss Johnston mounted the largest and most drastic shopping expedition hitherto, and returned from Kilnalough with a great supply of glass ornaments and coloured ribbons. In due course this enthusiasm spread to everyone, servants and guests alike; even the newcomers became eager to lend a hand. The old ladies underwent a gay metamorphosis and showed themselves full of energy, humming and singing as they worked, reach-ing up with trembling hands to pin mistletoe strategically over doors or intrepidly making their way up shivering step-ladders to hang coloured paper streamers. The Major watched them and admired their daring. Whenever a step-ladder began to get a fit of the shakes he would spring forward and anchor it firmly, but then perhaps another step-ladder would begin to rattle on the other side of the room and he would have to watch helplessly, with that mixture of resentment and admiration one feels as one watches trapeze artistes sailing dangerously here and there under the circus roof.

There was only one casualty. One of the less prominent ladies, Mrs Bates, fell off a high stool while trying to deposit a glass fairy on top of the grandfather clock in the writing-room and broke her hip. By an unusual stroke of luck there happened to be a young doctor staying in the hotel overnight on his way back to Dublin. He took charge of everything and Mrs Bates was whisked out of sight before her fate had time to affect the morale of her fellow-guests. A few days later the Major motored over to visit her in the Valebridge nursing-home...but he was too late. She had caught pneumonia and died in the meantime. "Poor Mrs Bates." Ankle-deep in a drift of dead leaves, he stood outside the nursing-home and sucked his moustache distractedly.

In the midst of all this cheerful activity and confusion Edward moved like a sleepwalker, silent and remote. If you called to him: "Where's the hammer?" or "Have you seen my scissors?" he would shake his head wordlessly, not bothering to understand. He seemed unaware that the grim walls around him were blossoming into festive colour. He remained where he was, at his table in the middle of the cavernous ballroom, slumped in a chair with a book open on his knee. The ladies, awed by his silence, tiptoed around the perimeter of the room as they executed their decorations. One day Miss Archer came to the Major and said: "He has a shotgun."

"Who has a shotgun?"

"Edward. It's on his table in the ballroom."

"Good God, what does he want that for?"

They stared at each other in consternation. Later, while Edward was out visiting his piglets, he went to have a look. It was perfectly true. On Edward's table there lay a shotgun, broken and unloaded. Beside it a dead frog lay on its back with its legs in the air, exposing a flabby white stomach.

All this time Padraig and Viola O'Neill visited the Majestic every day and roamed around with the twins, who had swiftly tired of helping with the decorations. For a few days they continued playing their game of dressing up Padraig as a girl. All of Angela's clothes were spilled out of their trunks, cupboards and packing-cases; the dresses that suited him were put in one pile, those that didn't in another. For a while they found this engrossing enough, but presently the job was finished. Just as interest was once again beginning to subside Viola remembered that they still had to consider the rest of Padraig's clothing, his underwear, petticoats, corsets and so forth. Soon they were all bubbling with hilarity as they struggled with eye-hooks and tugged on the strings of Angela's corsets—not that Padraig's shapely body needed any artificial correction of course, but they thought they might as well do the thing properly. After a day or two of trying to persuade the Major to go upstairs and have a look at Padraig clad variously in a camisole, a nightdress, and Angela's 1908-style swimming-costume (all of which invitations the Major declined firmly) the question of underwear similarly began to pall. It was clearly time to look for a new game.

The girls mooned about aimlessly for the next three or four days, telling people that they were bored and asking them for money—so that they could run away to Dublin and get raped like everyone else (they weren't too sure what this meant but it sounded interesting). Padraig, however, continued to dress up and sit with the ladies or glide along corridors with whispering skirts. Indeed, he had become such a familiar sight that scarcely anyone paid any attention to him now beyond, say, an absent-minded smile or a "Yes, dear...that *is* a lovely dress." The truth was that most of the ladies had probably forgotten by this time that he wasn't, in fact, a girl. Only once did he provoke a strong reaction: Mr Norton unaccountably exploded with anger one day and shouted: "Get out of my sight, you filthy little swine!" Everyone considered this to be amazing behaviour, but then old Mr Norton had always been considered uncouth, in spite of his mathematical genius. Padraig was made a special fuss of that day to compensate for his hurt feelings.

One bright, chilly December afternoon the Major came upon Padraig on one of the upper landings, standing mournfully by a window. He was dressed in a glistening evening dress of powder-blue satin with gloves to match and he wore a string of pearls round his neck. The Major felt sorry for him. He looked very lonely standing there by himself. With a sigh the Major moved to the window to see what he was looking at. The view from here was almost identical with that from Angela's room: there stood her "two elms and an oak," the

oak supposed to be a hundred and fifty years old, the edge of a path where the dogs sometimes wandered...and beyond, beyond what Angela's clouding eyes had been able to descry, the ground sloped down to a wood. Walking up from this wood were the twins and Viola, escorted by a couple of young Auxiliaries who were laughing and prancing about them, throwing their berets in the air like schoolboys. The girls clung tightly together but looked charmed nevertheless. They had found a new game.

In the course of the next few days the Major glimpsed them all together once or twice again, walking and laughing in some distant part of the grounds. Sometimes Padraig would be in the vicinity too, not with them but sulking hopefully at a distance (ignoring them when they shouted at him, however). The Major clicked his tongue. He should really tell Edward that the twins were meeting the young Auxiliaries. But these days it was no use telling Edward anything! Moreover, Edward was taking advantage of his good nature, there was no doubt about it, leaving him to do everything while he amused himself chopping up rats in the ballroom. Depression came down on the Major like a blanket of fog, suffocating him. What dreadful days these were! The future of the British Isles could never have seemed so dismal since the Romans had invaded; there was trouble everywhere. The ultimate stunning blow arrived just two days before Christmas with the news that, in spite of courageous resistance by Hobbs and Hendren, England had been defeated in the first test match in Australia by the appalling total of three hundred and seventy-seven runs.

And then it was Christmas, which, at least to begin with, turned out to be a more cheerful day than anyone had the right to expect. Edward, who had been expected to spend the day in the ballroom with his rats ignoring the festivities, surprised everyone by the way he bustled around full of cheerful greetings for whoever crossed his path. His good spirits persisted throughout the morning service in church: he lustily sang the Christmas hymns and repeatedly nodded with agreement during the sermon (the pleasure and virtue to be found in turning the other cheek). He cast twinkling glances at the surrounding pews and smiled indulgently at the young children fretting impatiently beside their parents. Certainly he talked too loudly at the church-door afterwards, and again during the gathering for sherry in the lounge before lunch, but compared with what one might have expected...! The Major heaved a genuine, though tentative, sigh of relief.

After lunch it occurred to the Major to ask Padraig how Dr Ryan was getting along. It was a considerable time since he had heard any news of the old man.

"Oh, much the same really."

"Hasn't he made it up with your parents then?"

"No." Padraig shook his head. He was ill at ease. His parents had given him boxing-gloves for Christmas and they were hung round his neck by their laces like swollen severed hands. A small fat boy in short trousers called Dermot had arrived two days earlier to spend the holiday with his parents and by a singular misfortune he had also been given boxing-gloves. The twins, aided by two attentive, curly-headed young men in mufti (whom the Major recognized, nevertheless, as the Auxiliaries from the garden), were ruthlessly trying to promote an afternoon fight between him and Padraig, an encounter for which neither of them had any stomach.

In the middle of the afternoon the Major took the Standard and motored over to the doctor's house to see how he was faring. Padraig had at first agreed to come with him in the hopes of avoiding his boxing-match with Dermot. But then Dermot's mother had intervened to say that she wanted her son to "save" some of his toys for the morrow, otherwise he would quickly get bored and complain that he had nothing to do. After a period of reflection Dermot elected to save his boxing-gloves. Besides, as Miss Archer pointed out tactfully, it was wrong to fight on Christmas Day...that sort of thing should be postponed until St Stephen's Day.

"Very well, then," said Matthews (one of the curly-headed young men), "the boxing will be for tomorrow." The other curly-headed young man was called Mortimer and his curls were almost as blond as those of the twins. He had frank blue eyes, moreover, good manners and a pleasant smile, not to mention the fact that he had been to a public school. It was clear to the Major that Mortimer did not owe his rank simply to the war-shortage of officers: this young chap was quite plainly officer material and could certainly be trusted to keep his somewhat more dubious companion, Matthews, under control. The Major was relieved about this—there was no telling what the twins might get up to with a little encouragement.

Winking at Padraig, the two young men took the twins off to play touch rugger in the ballroom with Viola and another young man, using an old Teddy bear belonging to the twins as a ball. Dermot and Padraig shyly exchanged a glance of mutual dislike and despair.

The Major found Dr Ryan at home and by himself as he had expected. What he had not expected was to find the old man in the kitchen laboriously trying to prepare his Christmas dinner. Where on earth were the bloody servants? the Major wanted to know. They had no business leaving a man of his age to fend for himself.

"Sent 'em home," grunted the doctor.

"But for heaven's sake! You can't cook for yourself! And how about your family?"

The feud with his family was maintained, it seemed. "Unionists!"

"Look here, why don't you come back to the Majestic with me...If you like we could take that chicken of yours with us and get the kitchen staff to see to it."

But the old man was obstinate. He'd sworn he'd not go near the place again! He'd not sit down with the British! He'd not have fellow-Irishmen working to feed his stomach while they had nothing to put in their

own! The Major listened to this nonsense with consternation. The old man was becoming a Bolshevist in his dotage!

While they talked Dr Ryan scraped feebly at a potato he was trying to peel. A man of his class peeling his own potatoes! This was too much for the Major. Elbowing the old doctor aside, he seized the potato from him and began to peel it in his place, and then another and another (by this time he had taken off his jacket). Dr Ryan, unable to leave well alone, tottered back and forth from the pantry collecting things.

"Will ye not stop and eat with me, Major?" But the Major had eaten already; his only interest was to see that the doctor ate. Still, he might stay to sample a little, see what it tasted like. And he became absorbed in the preparation of the meal —which luckily presented no great difficulties since the servants had left the chicken stuffed and it had only to be put in the oven. Ah, but there was no bread, except for the remains of a pan loaf, hard as steel, that was serving as a paperweight in the doctor's study. They would have to make do with the potatoes and Brussels sprouts. And so he set to work again. But all that peeling and chopping took him an age, and Dr Ryan kept wanting to help, getting in the way and giving advice, as if the Major didn't know what he was doing, which was more than the perspiring and exasperated Major could stand.

"Look, why don't you go and sit down and leave it to me?" he exploded at last.

But the old man had become bad-tempered too. He was probably hungry, although he said he wasn't. His mind had begun to wander as well...Fanny would soon be here, he said, with her mother and father, they were expected for Christmas. The Major did not know who Fanny was. He supposed she must be the doctor's wife, dead, though, forty years or more. And no one did come, which in the circumstances was perhaps just as well.

But then the doctor seemed to realize that he was being disagreeable and wandered away, returning almost immediately with two wine glasses and a bottle of sherry. So they had a drink and wished each other Merry Christmas...However, while the chicken was in the oven and they were waiting in vague desperation (the Major, too, had become horribly hungry, as if he hadn't eaten for days) for the wretched thing to cook, the old doctor, although he was plainly trying to be nice to the Major, kept bursting out "British blackguard!", which distressed the Major considerably.

Soon a tantalizing smell pervaded the kitchen, the smell of roasting chicken—but if anything this made them more hungry and bad-tempered than ever and, besides, there was still a great deal of work to be done. It was time, the Major judged, to put the vegetables on to boil. Should one put salt in the water with them?

"British blackguard!" muttered the doctor irritably. But then his mood changed and he murmured almost tenderly that the Major shouldn't worry, that life was a fugitive affair at best, he should know, he'd been a doctor for sixty years... Then he shuffled away to the lavatory, for the cold weather and the port he had been drinking made him incontinent, and when he came back he was saying that, really, people are insubstantial, they never last. He himself wouldn't last much longer, but that was a law of Nature, the body wears out... the Major wouldn't last very long either, but one had to accept it and make way for one's children and grandchildren... he himself had accepted it long ago because he had had to, long ago, when he was still a young fellow of the Major's age. But here he was interrupted by the need to go to the lavatory once more, though he had only just been there, and the Major poked desperately with a fork at the bubbling potatoes and Brussels sprouts which were still as hard as stones. Strange, said the doctor coming back, to think that a beautiful woman who seemed like a solid thing, solid as granite, was really no more solid than a flaring match, a burst of flame, darkness before and darkness after...People are insubstantial, they never last...And so he rambled on while the Major ground his teeth and prodded the vegetables with a fork.

At long last everything was ready and they sat down to eat at the kitchen table. Once more they toasted each other and really, thought the Major as they began to eat, it wasn't half bad considering everything, though the potatoes were still not completely cooked. The doctor was tired, however, and could eat very little —the wine had no doubt made him sleepy. The Major helped him back to his armchair in the other room and made up the fire, banking it down with wet slack so that it would last through the evening. Then he carved some breast of chicken and left it on a plate by the old man's side with a glass of port, in case he should feel hungry later on. Dr Ryan was dozing already, his head lolling against one of the wings of his armchair. The Major said goodbye, that he would call in tomorrow and perhaps bring Padraig. Without open-ing his eyes the old man made a faint, murmured reply that might have been: "British blackguard!"

Edward had fired his shotgun at Murphy! He had gone berserk and tried to slay the elderly manservant. The strain had been too much for him.

All afternoon the downpour had continued, so that by now the roads were flanked with bubbling pools; the wheels of the Standard sent out great bow-waves that saturated the hedges and stone walls. But the Major's eyes were on the winding road ahead, alert for signs of an ambush. No civilized person, of course, would wait behind a hedge in a downpour on the off chance that an ex-British-Army-officer might come driving by. But were the Irish civilized? The Major was not prepared to risk his life on the assumption that they were.

Nevertheless he reached the Majestic without incident. It was as he strode cheerfully into the lounge and found himself surrounded by pale excited faces that he realized that something was amiss. Everyone was talking at once, so that it was a few moments before he was able to understand what it was all about. Edward

had summoned Murphy about an hour ago. After a brief, heated discussion a terrible boom had reverberated throughout the building. A few minutes later Murphy had staggered out of the ballroom more dead than alive (though physically unscathed) and was now lying down somewhere.

"Where's Edward?"

"Still in the ballroom. But you'd better not go in."

"Don't worry. It was probably just an accident. I'll go and have a talk with him."

In the ballroom it was still light enough, thanks to the glass dome of the roof, for the Major to see Edward sitting at his table in the middle of the floor. He was scribbling rapidly on the top sheet of a thick stack of paper; a number of curl-ing pages lay beside him, already written on. As the Major watched, he came to the end of a page, threw it aside without waiting for the ink to dry and immediately started on another, the nib of his pen making a faint rasping sound, barely audible against the dull, steady roar of the rain drumming on the glass roof.

The Major took a few steps forward. Scattered on the parquet floor around Edward's table were a number of pinging jam-jars, two or three of which were already brimming. But more jam-jars were needed. Here and there shining puddles had already formed.

"Edward." The Major advanced with caution. "What's all this I hear about you firing a shotgun at Murphy?"

"Eh? Oh, it's you, Brendan. Watch out where you're walking. There's a drop of rain coming in. Wait, I'll get some light." He crossed to the grand piano and came back with some candlesticks which he arranged in a battery around his writing-table. He struck a match, touching off one candle after another until his desk shone like a lighthouse in the gathering gloom.

"It was just an experiment. Are they making a fuss?"

"They are a bit. You can't really blame them, you know."

"They'll get over it. As far as Murphy's concerned it had to be a shock, mind you. There was no other way of doing it. But I gave him a couple of quid, so I don't suppose he has any complaints. He'll be as right as rain in an hour or two."

Edward seemed calm and pleased with himself. The candlelight, however, throwing the lines and wrinkles of his face into sharp relief, gave him a haggard, insane look.

"It's never been done before. Never actually *measured*, that is...so, of course, as far as science is concerned it hasn't strictly speaking existed until now. Plenty of subjective reports, but they won't wash for your scientist. If you want my opinion, Brendan, nobody has ever *dared* to do it before. In Cannon's book *The Wisdom of the Body* he mentions a person who was captured by Chinese bandits and thought he was going to be shot. *His* mouth went dry, of course, but he didn't bother to find out *how* dry...He was a scientist too, I gather. Still, I suppose it's understandable."

"You mean you threatened to shoot Murphy."

"He believed me too. Went as white as a sheet. For a moment I was afraid he was going to pass out, which would have ruined the whole thing. I had to keep him talking for a while so that he could get a grip on himself...but not too much of a grip. Told him the first thing that came into m'head... that his service had been unsatisfactory and so forth, and that he had to be dealt with. Then I pulled both triggers. It made one hell of a noise...even scared me. I'd taken the shot out, of course, so it was only the caps going off. Even so, it brought down a cloud of plaster from the ceiling..." He gestured to a corner of the room where the Major perceived what looked like a snowdrift glimmering in the shadows. "The place needs doing up a bit." He cleared his throat and got to his feet as a drop of rain from a new leak in the roof hurtled into the area of light and drummed on the white stomach of the frog lying beside the ink-well. Picking up one of the jam-jars from the floor, he edged the frog aside with it, then sat down again.

"Anyway, I dropped the gun and got him to spit out what saliva he could manage into the measuring-glass. D'you realize that he could only produce four c.c.? It's incredible! Here, have a look. It may seem a bit more than that because I'm afraid a few drips of rain got into it before I realized what was happening."

The Major looked dubiously at the white froth in the measuring-jar.

"I'm drafting a paper to send to the Royal Society. Maybe you'd like to see it before I send it off."

"Yes, I would," the Major said.

Above them, against the streaming, echoing bubble of blackness, the rain increased in intensity. Presently Edward said: "I always wanted to make a contribution, however small."

The Major said nothing. Together they listened to the steady, musical drips in the jam-jars around them.

Nineteen-twenty-one. The rain continued to fall virtually without interruption into the New Year. By now most of the seasonal guests had disappeared, manifestly dissatisfied with their stay. But oh, if they had only known (reflected the Major) how much worse it might easily have been! He himself was so hardened that he no longer found it easy to sympathize about such matters as cold rooms and cold food, dirty towels and damp sheets. Besides, the near-escape of the dog Foch was still at the back of his mind. Compared with death itself these things pale into insignificance.

In spite of the continuing bad weather Edward refused to remove himself from the ballroom. The Major looked in on him once or twice and saw him sitting there, calmly dissecting a toad under an umbrella. The

jam-jars had proliferated around him, so that now, if one listened carefully, one could hear a symphony of drips against the percussion of rain from above. As for the toad, it reminded the Major only too horribly of things he still saw in his nightmares—indeed, for all its resemblance to a toad it might have been strawberry jam scooped out of one of the jars and thinly spread on Edward's marble slab. As for the old ladies, they now had no other resource than to grit their teeth and survive as best they could the awful weeks between Christmas and Easter, keep their noses above the surface somehow or other until the green leaves were back on the trees. As for Padraig, he had not been seen for a few days. Although Dermot had by now gone back to school with his boxing-gloves, the two young Auxiliaries, Matthews and Mortimer, claimed to have found another prospective sparring-partner for him, the son of a farmer of the region—a lad who, although only twelve years old, was reputed to have to shave twice a day. As for the Major himself, the start of the new year could not help but fill him with a young man's irrational optimism. Perhaps nineteen-twenty-one was the year he would get married (to Sarah, naturally, since matrimony involving any other girl was quite unthinkable)—but even if he did not (and he could not escape the unpleasant fact that for the moment he did not even know where she was), even if he did not, it was still a new year. Something new was sure to happen.

Moreover, any new year was a gift that the Major somehow felt that he did not deserve. Although the *Weekly Irish Times* no longer published those inky photographs of dead men on the front page, the last stragglers having by now made up their minds whether to live or die (and those that were going having gone), he still had the same grateful but uneasy sensation. "You must do the living for all the others as well as yourself," a kindly Scottish doctor had once said to him in hospital, trying to coax him back out of the cold areas of chagrin and indifference where his mind had chosen to stray. But of course that was easier said than done, particularly at the Majestic.

The weather continued bitterly cold for the next few days. Getting out of bed in the morning, taking a bath with an icy draught sighing underneath the bathroom door, became an agony. The Major's teeth chattered and he thought with physical distress of sunshine and Italy. People spoke little during this cold weather; the ladies curled themselves up in tight little bundles and compressed their lips to preserve every particle of warmth in their bodies. Twelfth Night came and went, but nobody thought of taking down the decorations. One had to keep one's arms tightly hugging one's sides these days; lift them for a moment and the chilly sword of pneumonia would run you through.

Not only for the ladies was this a bad time. Padraig too was in despair. His father was now talking of having him apprenticed as a clerk in a solicitor's office in Dublin, a prospect which no person of sensitivity could tolerate. Faith told the Major that Padraig was going about telling the ladies that he would prefer to dress himself in a scarlet cloak and leap from the battlements of the Majestic. The Major told her to tell him on no account to go near the battlements, they weren't safe. The ornamental façade might give way at any moment.

Wearing mittens and a Balaclava helmet, the Major sat in the residents' lounge on a bright February morning reading of the day's disasters in the *Irish Times*. Looking up, he noticed that Edward had come into the room. He gave a violent start. With Edward was Sarah! Her face was pale and tense; she looked unhappy. Edward stared sightlessly past her, but his lips were moving rapidly as he spoke to her in an undertone. Only for an instant, as he came to the end of what he was saying, did he allow his eyes to focus on her face before retiring to scan the empty reaches of the room once more. Sarah was protesting bitterly about something. The Major dropped his eyes and pretended to be engrossed in the newspaper. Sarah stood talking with Edward near the fire for a few moments. The Major was aware that her glance rested on him once or twice, as if waiting for the moment when he would look up and their glances would meet. However, he continued to scrutinize the *Irish Times,* frowning with concentration. Presently he was aware that she and Edward were moving away again through the chairs and tables towards the door. When he at last permitted himself to look up they were no longer there. "What a fool I am! It would have been much better if I'd gone up to her and made some cheerful remark and then wandered away again, so that she'd have realized how little she means to me since she told Edward about the letters I wrote her."

Edward's experiments were languishing once again. His toad, spread out invitingly on the marble slab, had been devoured during the night by the omnipresent cats—they had evidently been undeterred by the fact that the toad had been marinated in formalin, which had turned it a blue-black colour, more like damson jam than strawberry. Edward still sat among his books and implements, lost in thought, his face extinct. But now sometimes his seriousness gave way abruptly to disconcerting bouts of hilarity; he became once more a player of mild practical jokes. To the Major, who had no sense of humour, practical jokes were disagreeable in the normal course of affairs; in cold weather they became intolerable—one simply had no energy left to cope with them. But nevertheless he was obliged to keep a constant watch on Edward, jokes or no jokes; he was obliged to haunt him, in fact, flitting along chilly corridors, taking walks in the grounds whenever Edward went to commune with his piglets, or repeatedly passing the ballroom windows to ascertain that he was still at his desk. The reason, of course, was that sooner or later Sarah would come again to visit Edward. Honour required the Major to seize the opportunity of making some casual remark to her which would indicate his indifference.

The three of them met head-on in one of the high-hedged privet alleys of the Chinese Garden.

"Hello, Brendan," she said with a smile.

"Oh, hello...you're back, are you?" replied the Major casually, turning pale. Even though he had been prepared for this inevitable meeting, it had still come as a dreadful shock. She looked very pretty in her winter coat of heavy grey wool trimmed with dark musquash, fingers buried in a fur muff, ears hidden by a fur cape. Her eyes remained steadily on the Major's, disconcerting him. In order to avoid this gaze he turned about and strolled in the direction they were going.

Edward himself seemed disconcerted for a moment; he had been talking with animation but had stopped suddenly on seeing the Major. Edward continued to look distressed until his eye fell on a bird-bath in the shape of a giant sea-shell proffered by a cement nymph. Her body was naked, clothed only in patches of yellow green lichen on her stomach and beneath her arms; one foot had been broken off, a rusty wire projected from the stump of her ankle. The Major studied her with feigned interest.

A great deal of snow had collected in the sea-shell and Edward was busy patting it together to make a snowball which he drolly pretended to throw at Sarah.

"Oh, for God's sake!" she muttered testily.

A little farther on they reached the terrace balustrade from where they could look down on the frozen swimming-pool. The twins had made a slide on the ice by shunting back and forth along a track to make it slippery. They were busy there now, skirts hitched up to their knees, running down the frosted grass and leaping over the lip of the pool to skid with gracefully flexed bodies to the other end. They stopped to watch this game for a moment, then Edward hurled his snowball as Charity was bounding forward on to the ice. Although it missed, it startled her, causing her to lose her balance and sit down heavily. There was laughter from Edward and soon a snowball fight was raging. Sarah forgot her bad humour and soon her slender fingers had left the warmth of her muff to dig into the freezing snow.

The Major loathed this sort of thing but joined in nevertheless. Sarah and Edward were enjoying themselves so much—besides, he did not want Sarah to think he lacked a sense of fun. Soon he got his reward. A snowball hurled by one of the twins struck him on the ear and made his head ring. He retired at that, laughing like a good sport—but displeased nevertheless, cupping his tender ear in the palm of his hand. Faith afterwards apologized: the twins had learned in a hard school and put stones in the middle of their snowballs. But the one that had hit the Major had been intended to flatten Sarah, not him. She was dreadfully sorry.

"Good heavens, why Sarah?" asked the Major, astonished that anyone could fail to like such a lovely girl.

"Oh, because she's so bloody awful," Faith said vaguely. "She's always hanging around Daddy." The Major frowned then, to show his disapproval of swearing. He frowned later, too, on thinking it over. How he wished it were him instead of Edward that Sarah was always hanging around...!

What was going on between Edward and Sarah anyway? She still came to the Majestic quite frequently, but both she and Edward were always looking so grim these days. They did not behave in the least like lovers. Although his indifference to her had been amply demonstrated, the Major still could not prevent himself from haunting the couple, in the hope of getting further opportunities to demonstrate it. Thus it was that while flitting after them along a dim corridor one day he heard Edward exclaim: "You're not the only woman in Kilnalough!"

"Who else would look at you twice?" jeered Sarah in a tone that the Major recognized only too well. After that she stopped coming to the Majestic.

* * *

TROUBLE IN INDIA

The centre of growing Indian unrest seems to have shifted from the Punjab to the United Provinces. Here, in the Oudh district, a serious land agitation has been in progress for the past month. It has given rise to violent outbursts and the United Provinces today are passing through a crisis not unlike that which reached its most acute phase in Ireland forty years ago. Hatred of the landlords is the cause of all the trouble and, undoubtedly, the peasantry has many grievances.

The trouble in the United Provinces has furnished a rare opportunity to Mr Gandhi. His object is the expulsion of the British from India, and he will welcome the aid of the Fyazabad farm labourers just as heartily as if they were Sikhs from the Punjab or Brahmins from Madras. Unless the dispute be settled quickly the agitators will succeed in convincing the rioters that their real enemy is the *Raj*...

Throughout the Punjab, in Delhi, and now even in Calcutta, this fanatical "patriot" has proclaimed his boycott of British rule. He has transformed peaceful villages into hotbeds of intrigue and sedition, and his lieutenants, by their plausible sophistries, have fired the imaginations of young Indians with crazy ideas. Mr Gandhi is the author of his country's unrest. While he is allowed to preach his gospel India will continue to seethe with discontent.

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THE GREATEST NEED

Ireland is being ground to powder between the two millstones of crime and punishment. For those whose sense of horror recent events have not blunted the daily newspaper has become a nightmare. The deliberate death-blow and the wandering bullet fired in attack or defence spare neither sex nor age. On Monday night a police officer's wife was murdered at Mallow and the officer himself sorely wounded. Immediately afterwards, in a fight with forces of the Crown, one man was killed and seven were wounded. Human life is cheaper today in Munster than in Mexico. The explosion of bombs has become a common sound in Dublin, where yesterday another attack was made on a police motor car in Merrion Square...We believe that a national demand for a stoppage of murder and lawlessness, made with a single voice by our Churches, our newspapers, our public bodies, our farmer's unions, our Chambers of Commerce, would be the herald of a new day of hope and peace for Ireland. No man has a right to say that this great act of faith would be fruitless until it has been attempted. Who will give the lead?

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By this time the Major was perfectly numb to the daily horrors printed by the newspaper. He had become used to them as he had once become used to the dawn barrage. He supposed that one day it would all come to an end, somehow or other, because the situation was by no means static. On the contrary, it continued to get worse. “It has to get worse before it can get better,” remarked one of the ladies who was used to looking on the bright side. Early in January the sinister De Valera was reported to have returned to Ireland from America, having travelled, according to rumour, in, variously, a German submarine, a seaplane and a luxury yacht. Shortly afterwards there had been talk of peace negotiations between him and Lloyd George—but the days had gone by, multiplying into weeks. Nothing more had been heard. Instead, the Major congratulated himself on having resisted the impulse to visit the theatre in Dublin; a man sitting in the stalls of the Empire was shot in the chest while watching the pantomime *The House that Jack Built.* The advertisement for the show in the *Irish Times* carried the slogan: “Not a dull moment from rise to fall of curtain.” Meanwhile the English cricket team continued to lose test matches in Australia by huge margins.

In mid-February a young widow appeared at the Majestic. Her name was Frances Roche. Though not exactly beautiful, she was a pleasant young lady, without airs or graces, the sort of person one felt inclined to trust instinctively. Her husband had died early in the war leaving her comfortably off, a fact which lent her considerable prestige at the Majestic. But she took no advantage of it. She was just as kind to impoverished Miss Bagley as she was to wealthy Miss Staveley. True, she aroused some criticism because in certain respects she was inclined to be “modern” and lacking in finesse. But for the most part she was well received.

Mrs Roche had arrived accompanied by her mother, Mrs Bates, who in every respect was an older, more portly version of herself, though much less modern. Her mother was not in the least talkative, however. She listened and smiled but was hardly ever heard to utter a syllable. There was always a greater shortage of listeners than of talkers at the Majestic, and the new Mrs Bates (as opposed to the old Mrs Bates who had fallen off the stool before Christmas and long since gone to her reward) was as popular as her daughter. But it was, of course, in the daughter that Edward one day began to show an interest.

It was some time before the Major perceived what Edward had in mind, partly because he found it impossible to believe that any man in his right mind could prefer Mrs Roche, charming though she was, to Sarah—but then he remembered the jeering remark he had overheard and concluded that Edward was treating it as a challenge—and partly because Edward’s method of courtship was a curious one, consisting of advances so discreet as to be virtually invisible to anyone but himself. For example, he treated Mrs Roche herself with decorous formality and instead engaged her mother in long conversations which soon became—since Mrs Bates only allowed herself an occasional smile or nod of agreement—a rather frantic series of questions and answers, both supplied by Edward himself. “Ah, I see you’re interested in that painting over there,” he would say if Mrs Bates’s gaze wandered away from his face. “It shows King William crossing the Boyne after the famous battle...All the smoke in the background and so forth...” And then, shaking his head: “You’re wondering just what it was all about, I expect, apart from the religious aspect. Well, I’m afraid you have me there. We must ask Boy O’Neill. He’s sure to know all about it.” “Do we always have such a hard winter in Kilnalough? Now let me see: if I recollect rightly, last year and the year before that...” And so on.

For some time past Edward’s appearance at dinner had become extremely erratic. As likely as not he would be content to eat off his knees wherever in the hotel Murphy, carrying a tray, happened to find him. But now he once more took to appearing punctually and presently he got into the habit of showing Mrs Roche to a seat at the end of the table where he sat himself, thereby dislodging old Mrs Rappaport to sit at the end of the Major’s table. They were too far away to talk to each other, of course, but think of their position—one at each end of the table! It gave them such an air of being *en famille* that Edward was clearly embarrassed to be making his intentions so obvious; yet to his evident surprise Frances Roche showed no sign of being aware of them, chatting pleasantly as she had always done to the old ladies sitting on either side. There was no sign at all of blushes or swoons or melting glances (some of the looks the old ladies gave him, on the other hand, would have turned the milk sour). Was Mrs Roche perhaps rather stupid? Edward might have wondered. As a scientist, of course, he should have known that young ladies no longer functioned, physiologically speaking, quite as they had done when he was a young man: they no longer swooned in a difficult situation (“indeed,” thought the Major gloomily, “the modern young lady would be more likely to punch you on the jaw”). But Mrs Roche seemed even to be unaware that she was in a difficult situation.

He was getting nowhere. Like it or not, if this difficulty was ever to be resolved he would have to make his overtures even more brutally frank. Thus, at any rate, did the Major interpret the fact that Murphy was ordered to place the soup tureen and plates at Mrs Roche’s end of the table so that she should serve the food. And she did serve the food—with Edward’s dilated pupils fixed to her homely features, trying to find some trace of awareness in them. But Mrs Roche ladled the transparent, faintly steaming bouillon into one dish after another as if she were doing the most natural thing in the world, which indeed she was.

Edward was beginning to lose heart by now. He had taken to brooding darkly at his end of the table. He was bewildered, the Major could see. One had to feel sorry for him. But then the Major thought of Sarah and hardened his heart as with a sigh he turned back to sift through the watery hot-pot on his plate in search of a piece of meat suitable for Mrs Rappaport’s marmalade cat, sitting on its stool and staring him down with expressionless, acid eyes.

The next thing was to take Mrs Roche for afternoon drives in the Daimler. These tended to be tedious and

repetitive because, with the country in such an uproar, it was not safe to go far afield. The twins were usually present, conscripted at the price of violent scenes and sulks to chaperon their father. Sarcastic remarks were passed about the beauties of the countryside. Worse, the twins had recently become experts on the subject of sexual intercourse, thanks to a volume wrapped in brown paper lent to them by one of the young Auxiliaries. As a result they were inclined to take a disabused view of all relations between men and women, and this view even extended to their father's afternoon drives in the motor car. "Oh, for heaven's sake grab her, Daddy," the appalled Major overheard Faith groaning to her sister. "Throw her on her back, that's what she wants!"

But Edward, of course, did nothing of the sort and gradually, although Mrs Roche continued to sit at the end of his table, the afternoon drives declined in frequency and were forgotten.

"One needs every now and then to escape from the company of women into a place from which women are excluded. After all, unless he has sisters or comes from the lower classes a young Englishman is likely to grow up entirely among males. Later in life he simply isn't accustomed to a heavy dosage of female company. And surely, if the English gentleman is respected throughout the world for his courtesy towards the gentler sex, it is because he takes care to provide himself with a room in which he can be alone in the company of other men." So the Major was thinking as he sat in the gun room with Edward on a frosty moonlit night.

It was very quiet. There was no movement in the house or in the trees outside the window. Edward was gazing abstractedly into the fire, enjoying a rare moment of tranquillity. Presently, however, a small oak leaf of white plaster dropped from a wreath on the dim ornamented ceiling and shattered into pieces on the tiles by Edward's feet. He gave a start and peered up at the ceiling.

"We really must do something, Brendan, about the old place. It needs doing up badly. One simply can't let things slide."

The Major raised his eyebrows dubiously but said nothing. He remembered Edward's indifference about the piece of the façade which had almost crushed the dog Foch. By comparison the distintegration of the ceiling plaster was trivial. But Edward had begun to interest himself in what he was saying.

"There's so much wrong with the place no wonder we get complaints from some of the guests (because we *do* get complaints, Brendan, from time to time). Heaven only knows when we last had a lick of paint and some new wall-paper, not to mention the things like mending broken windows and replacing some of those old curtains that the moths have been getting at...And then we need to have a look at the roof, I hear there was a positive waterfall cascading down one of the servants' staircases during that spell of rainy weather we had over Christmas. And of course we must get that M put back up there...it looks too absurd the way it is... "AJESTIC"...whoever heard of such a word?...and make sure none of the other letters are going to fall off...After all, if one's going to run a hotel it may as well be a good one, what d'you think?"

"I quite agree," the Major said with a sigh, doubtful that Edward's enthusiasm would last long enough to become action. "I should think the first job is to make sure none of the masonry falls on anybody's head."

"Absolutely! That's the ticket. Really put the old place back on its feet again. We could clean out the swimming-pool and maybe try to get that wretched 'Do More' generator working again..."

"And maybe the Turkish Baths," added the Major, who at that moment felt like taking a Turkish bath and was prepared to join Edward's romancing. Edward was being serious, however.

"The Turkish Baths might present us with a tiny bit of a problem, actually. We did try to get them going again some years back but it was a disaster. The boilers suddenly went haywire and before anyone knew what was happening half a dozen guests had suffered heat prostration...Had to be carried out, poached like lobsters..."

"Well, we must do something about the Palm Court before it undermines the foundations. And the squash court..."

"Ah yes, and the squash court. Of course I'd have to find another place for the piggies, but that shouldn't be impossible. Really, the place has all the amenities...all we need to do is to fix things up. Mind you, with the state of the country this may not be the best time to get people over here from England. But with luck the situation should be under control by the beginning of the season...I hear that Dublin Castle has a plan to start shooting Sinn Feiners by roster until they stop attacking the police...We could put an advertisement in *The Times* and do something about the tennis courts. Pity not to make use of them."

Edward was on his feet now, his eyes gleaming with enthusiasm. As he talked he jingled some loose change in his pocket, which caused the Major to wonder where the money for all this splendid refurbishing would come from. But Edward's enthusiasm was infectious. How was it that he had never thought of this before? he was wanting to know. His eyes had been opened! The Majestic was no fantasy. It was solid. It was there! It had everything that was needed... indeed, it had more than most places: it had electric light. It even had a firmly established reputation as a place of fashionable luxury—tarnished, doubtless, but a reputation nevertheless.

Dubious again, the Major listened as Edward talked on excitedly. At his feet Rover stirred and barked fearfully, peering with his sightless eyes into the threatening darkness all around. Poor dog! The Major dropped a soothing hand to scratch that fretfully acute silken ear. Rover allowed himself to sink back to the

floor again and yawned, emitting a frightful smell.

Edward was too excited to sleep. It was all the Major could do to prevent him setting off there and then on a tour of the premises, notebook in hand, summoning from their beds masons and carpenters, plumbers, painters and glaziers. When in a little while the Major climbed the stairs to bed he left Edward wandering from one silent, sleeping room to another, raising branched candlesticks to gaze with inspired eyes at cobwebbed walls and dusty brocade curtains which, after all the years they had hung there, still glinted dimly with their heavy gold thread, woven into the dusty, tattered cloth like the thread of hope that runs from youth to age.

Edward continued to move through the house, treading softly as a ghost, staring and staring, his heart beating strongly, his eyes full of tears. He sat down once on the arm of a chair, as if he were drunk, overcome by exhilaration, gazing around at this house which he had somehow never really *seen* before. And he continued for a while to sit there with tears of joy coursing down his cheeks, thinking now of his wife, now of Angela, now of his friend the Major. He sat there until his candles had burned down to thin liquid wafers of wax. Suddenly the thought came to him that he should give a ball—a magnificent ball, the kind of ball they used to give here in the old days. His excitement surged to new heights. This would mark the rebirth of the Majestic! He must go and tell the Major immediately, wake him up if necessary. A Spring Ball will be held at the Majestic in Kilnalough. The pleasure of your company is requested...the formal delicacy of this phrase enchanted him. The pleasure of your company.

Faintly from outside in the park there came the shattering, lonely cry of a peacock. For a moment the sound of that cry disturbed him—aching, beyond hope. As he got to his feet there was a threatening movement in the darkly swaying shadows. But it was only one of the multitude of cats, out for the purposes of hunting or mating in the Majestic's endless forest of furniture.

One evening towards the end of March Edward and the Major were to be seen standing together in the foyer, the latter smoking a thin Havana cigar, the former keeping an apprehensive eye on the drive. The Major was impeccably dressed in white tie and tails—it was easy to see that both he and his tailor were men of distinction. Edward was also dressed in tails, but of a more antique cut—which was strange when one considered the care he normally took about his appearance. Moreover, the contours of his body had changed somewhat over the years that had elapsed since the tailor had done his work: the years revealed themselves in the horizontal strain marks where the top of his trousers surrounded his stomach, in the severe grip that the coat exerted across his shoulders from one armpit to another, encouraging his arms to hang outwards, penguin fashion. Nevertheless he was an imposing figure. Evening dress suited his craggy, leonine features by putting them in a civilized perspective. They made him look both fierce and harmless, a lion in a cage. Even the red carnation he wore in his buttonhole—on Edward's person it gave one a mild shock, as if one had just come face to face with a prizefighter with a flower behind his ear.

"This looks like somebody."

A Bentley had come nosing up the drive and now, at a walking pace, was making a wide turn in front of the statue of Queen Victoria. A pale glimmer of faces showed at its windows, staring out at the hotel.

"That's deuced odd. They're making off again. You don't think they might have changed their minds at the last moment, do you?"

But the Major did not answer. He was not worried about some guests who could not make up their minds out there in the darkness. He was listening intently. Had he just heard a deep, ominous miaowing issue from some distant reaches of the building?

Those wretched cats, the trouble they had caused! First they had tried hunting them out of the upper storeys with broomsticks, sweeping them out of the rooms, along the corridors and down the stairs into the yard. But it is impossible to control a herd of cats; each one makes up its own mind where it wants to go. You start off with a vast furry flock, terrified and resentful. But then, quick as lightning, they double back or flash between your legs or over your head, zoom up the curtains or on to the top of wardrobes, and sit there spitting at you while you try to reach them with your broom and the rest of the flock disperses. You are lucky if you succeed in ushering out one scarred old ginger warrior whom, likely as not, you find waiting for you once again at the top of the stairs, having slipped back in through a broken window or down a chimney.

"Hello, they seem to be coming back."

The Bentley had reappeared on the lamplit crescent of gravel travelling slowly backwards, having locked antlers with an immense De Dion-Bouton on the narrow drive. Both motor cars stopped this time and disgorged their occupants, so Edward opened the door and with a welcoming smile on his lips moved out on to the steps. As the Major followed him he again heard that ominous caterwauling in the distance and remembered Edward's brainwave: "Bring the dogs in from the yard and quarter them in the upper storeys...that'll get rid of the bloody cats!" Well, they had tried this, of course. But it had been a complete failure. The dogs had stood about uncomfortably in little groups, making little effort to chase the cats but defecating enormously on the carpets. At night they had howled like lost souls, keeping everyone awake. In the end the dogs had been returned to the yard, tails wagging with relief. It was not their sort of thing at all.

The Major was now shaking hands repeatedly and smiling as he was introduced. More carriages were

arriving. Horns were sounding cheerfully. The Hammonds, the FitzPatricks, the Craigs with son and daughter-in-law, the Russells from Maryborough, the Porters, the FitzHerberts and FitzSimons, the Maudsley girls, Annie and Fanny, from Kingstown, Miss Carol Feldman, the Odlums and the O'Briens, the Allens and the Douglases and the Prendergasts and the Kirwans and the Carrutherses and Miss Bridget O'Toole...The Major's head began to swim and his smile became fixed.

"One doesn't shoot cats" (he was thinking as his weary paw gripped that of Sir Joshua Smiley and he bowed pleasantly to his ugly brood of daughters), "one doesn't shoot cats, other quadrupeds one may shoot without a qualm, but not cats." Still, what else was there to be done? The blessed creatures had to be got rid of somehow (the distant caterwauling, meanwhile, was becoming intense; a whole chorus of tom-cats it sounded like, he could hear it even above the hubbub of the arriving guests)...

So one day he and Edward had steeled themselves to climb the stairs with revolvers. The eucalyptus reek of cats was overpowering, so long had they had dominion over the upper storeys. Ah, the shrieks had been terrible, unnerving, as if it were a massacre of infants that they were about—but it had to be done, in the interests of the Majestic.

Edward these days had a shaky hand; several times he missed altogether, in spite of the long hours of practice he had put in at the pistol-range down by the lodge. Twice he wounded the cats he aimed at. It was the Major who had to seek out the moaning animals and finish them off. All this made a dreadful mess: blood on the carpets, there for ever, ineradicable, brains on the coverlets, vile splashes on the walls and even on the ceiling. Edward, in his excitement, shot out a couple of window-panes and caused a great plaster scroll bearing the words "*Semper fidelis*" to plummet earthwards, taking with it a rotting window-box gay with crocuses from one of the ladies' rooms two storeys below. Apologetic for his poor marksmanship, Edward had insisted on gathering up all the carcases and throwing them into a sack he had brought for that purpose. When they had been collected he threw the sack over his shoulder and descended the stairs. The Major followed, jingling the empty brass shells in the palm of his hand. By the time they had reached the second landing the sack was oozing dark red drops. Fortunately the carpet too was red. The drops scarcely showed.

By this time the Major's smile had become a painful grimace. One person after another; he greeted whoever stepped in front of him in the same mechanical way. Even if Kaiser Bill had suddenly shook him by the hand he would probably just have smiled and murmured: "Jolly glad you were able to come." But now, abruptly, face to face with the stout and venerable Lady Devereux (a second cousin of the Viceroy), he startled her with a brilliant smile and exuberant greet-ing. He had just realized what that dreadful miaowing was that had been so disturbing him: it was merely the orchestra tuning up in the distant ballroom. Tuned to perfection, or as near as one could ask, they had at last gathered themselves together and were playing a lively waltz, the strains of which wafted pleasantly into the foyer. Hearing this sound, a number of the guests, who had been met by hired flunkeys carrying trays of champagne but had lingered chatting more sombrely than one would have expected, brightened up a shade, as if with the thought that something they had been dreading might not, after all, turn out quite as badly as they had expected. There was a perceptible movement then, a venturing inwards away from this friendly antechamber to the mild spring night.

But the Major was still repeatedly having his hand shaken. "There are some really splendid people here already. Perhaps it won't turn out so badly after all." And then he mused: "Why are people from abroad always so much more distinguished than people from Ireland?" His eyes fell on the distinguished figure of Mr Robert Cumming, a visitor from North Carolina, chatting with Mr Russell McCormmach and the beautiful Miss Bond from Scotland. "How courteous and enlightened they are! (They make the Irish look like oxen.) How naturally they wear their evening dress! What will become of all these splendid people?" he wondered, gazing rapt at Miss Bond's lovely face, her clear eyes and delightful smile, at the gay and charming Mrs Margaret Dobbs who had just come in at that moment, at the young faces that swirled by. "What happens to such people? They never get old, that much is certain. They vanish suddenly one day. They change by magic into something different, utterly different. So that one moment there is a lovely girl and the next some other creature, as different from her as a frog is from the tadpole it used to be. What will become of us all?" he mused (including himself because, after all, he knew himself to be quite handsome too). And this unanswered question left him in a mood of melancholy which he rather enjoyed—because, of course, it was a problem he did not have to face immediately. (One day we shall vanish. But for the moment how lovely we are!)

Ripon and his wife arrived and while Edward greeted them, as stiffly as if they were people he scarcely knew, the Major concluded that his optimism regarding the success of Edward's ball had perhaps been premature. The young people were marvellous, of course, but there were *so few of them*! And young people, the Major knew by experience, were absolutely vital to the success of a ball.

At this moment, however, a large number of handsome young men arrived. The older guests who were still stand-ing in the foyer turned to look at these newcomers and once again they brightened a little. The presence of youth, the Major reflected, very often raises the spirits (however grudgingly) of older people. His own spirits were not raised, however, even though his right hand was grateful for the opportunity of taking a rest. A curt nod was enough greeting for these young men. Two dozen of so of the ex-officers among the Auxiliaries had been invited by Edward, for the chronic shortage of young men in Europe was also felt here in Ireland (whose ruling classes, at any rate, had not waited for the conscription that never came). The result was this: one had to make do with the young men who had survived, whatever their quality.

“You look lovely, my dear.”

Charity was plucking at his sleeve. She and Faith were both dressed in splendid hooped white crinolines; too old-fashioned even to have been culled from Angela’s wardrobe, they had been discovered, with cries of bliss, packed away in a forgotten trunk, abandoned by some guest from another era. All their dressing-up of Padraig had given the twins an idea of the dramatic possibilities of clothes; instead of sulking at the prospect of being unfashionable they had set to work with needle and thread—with the result that if their faces had been sufficiently grave and doleful they might well have passed for the elegant inbred daughters of a mad Spanish king.

“It’s Granny. She’s being frightfully obstinate. She simply refuses to give in.”

“I don’t know what I can do.”

“Please come and try. You *must,* Brendan! It’ll be too shaming. Everyone will laugh themselves silly...”

The Major agreed reluctantly; he wanted to be on hand to greet Sarah when she arrived. After a quick look outside to make sure that she was not on the threshold he followed Charity upstairs to the suite of rooms occupied by Mrs Rappaport on the first floor. The old lady was sitting bolt upright in front of her dressing-table, a flustered maid at her side.

“Well, Mrs Rappaport, what’s all this I hear about you being in danger? I never heard such a story in all my life! I can assure you that nobody means to hurt a hair on your head.”

The old lady was wearing a long gown of black velvet, a dress (the Major had heard) which had formed part of her trousseau but which she deemed herself never sufficiently to have worn; the cloth had been quite unsuitable to the climate in India, yet by the time she and her husband had returned to the more temperate climate of the British Isles her youth had fled, taking with it most of the social occasions at which it might have been suitable. Curiously, though unaltered, it still fitted her to perfection (unlike poor Edward’s suit). This could only be a tribute to her relentless habit of sitting up straight and eschewing all forms of self-indulgence. It was strange to think that the proportions of her body were unchanged inside all that black velvet, the proportions, presumably (it could hardly have been her dowry), which old General Rappaport had once found irresistible.

The maid, Faith and Charity were all looking at him expectantly, waiting for him to work a miracle. He dropped his eyes from the glinting diamond pendant the old lady wore around her withered neck and with a sigh fixed them on the worn leather holster she had strapped around her velvet waist. Pulling up a chair, he sat down opposite her, repeating in a reassuring tone that there was really no danger, none at all. Moreover, even if there had been any danger, a whole platoon of young policemen were among the guests. Let a Shinner so much as sneeze out of place and hey presto! he would find himself handcuffed to the nearest grand piano in a brace of shakes.

“Oh do talk *sense,* Brendan,” pleaded Faith, close to tears. “She hasn’t the vaguest idea what you’re talking about. Can’t you be firm with her? The ball is going to be over before we’ve even found anyone to dance with...”

“Look here, I’m doing my best,” replied the Major, offended. “Besides, if you will interrupt me...Why don’t you both go downstairs and send Miss Archer up here. She’ll know what to do, I expect. Or Mrs Roche if you can’t find Miss Archer.”

The twins required no second bidding. They squeezed their crinolines through the doorway and raced ballooning down the stairs three at a time. The Major turned back to Mrs Rappaport. Few new notions succeeded in getting through to her these days, but when one did it tended to preoccupy her. All the more unlucky, therefore, that when someone had happened to mention the “troubles” to her a day or two earlier, her mind had been sent back to heaven only knew what lonely Indian station out in the middle of nowhere with a vociferous, gesticulating, hopelessly untrustworthy rabble of natives at the gates; the women had had to be armed, taught how to use a revolver and reminded to save the last shot for themselves. Now, sixty years later, on the one night in years that it mattered, the old lady had remembered her elementary weapon training, found her departed husband’s revolver and, thin lips quivering, buckled it on.

As the Major reasoned with her gently, and drew his chair closer with the intention of disarming her when the time was ripe, the hideous marmalade cat leaped nimbly out of the hat-box in which it had been sleeping, stretched luxuriously, and bunched itself to jump into the old lady’s lap. There it settled, obscuring the buckle which the Major had been hoping to undo. It fixed the Major with a bitter, hostile gaze. The situation seemed hopeless. But at that moment there was a knock on the door and Miss Archer came in, followed by Mrs Roche, both looking serene and capable.

“She mustn’t be allowed to go downstairs wearing it or the twins will die of mortification,” the Major explained, and then hurried away, leaving the matter in their hands.

Since Edward’s moment of inspiration as he roamed the building by candlelight a month or so earlier a great deal of work had been done at the Majestic. It was on a new carpet with new rods that the Major’s patent-leather dancing shoes were now treading as he made his way downstairs, thick and blood-red (which was a good thing since the farther down the stairs they had gone the more copiously had the sack of cats oozed its morbid liquid). True, this carpet came to an abrupt end on reaching the first landing and gave way to the old threadbare and faded one—but in theory it might have come to an end just round the first bend of the banister, the last point that could be glimpsed from any part of the foyer unless one stood on a chair. It

was a tribute to Edward's generous nature that no such parsimonious thought had occurred to him. Besides, although guests do sometimes climb stairs uninvited, out of curiosity, they really had no business going up there at all.

The Major paused for a moment at the foot of the stairs and surveyed the foyer, which, though now empty, was brilliantly lit, first by the crude blaze of the torch which had been lifted out of its iron bracket by the stairs, soaked and set ablaze as a fiery welcome to the guests; then by the great ninety-six-branched chandelier which had earlier been converted to electricity and now, with the failure of the "Do More" generator, had been converted back again—candles had been softened and stuck where necessary on to the lifeless prongs of the empty bulb-sockets. Oil lamps with windows of coloured glass had been hung elsewhere and in the vast open hearth a log fire was burning.

All this blaze of light was picked up and reflected by the waxed and polished tiles on the floor (firmly cemented so that they no longer clinked underfoot); it glinted on the golden cheeks of cherubs, freshly dusted and holding mirrors (which were, however, still peeling behind their polished glass). The great sofas that slumbered round the walls had been dragged out on to the steps one morning and pummelled with carpet-beaters, which raised such a thick grey fog as to mask the sun to a pale amber disc, until at last no more dust would rise. But now they glowed a dark cherry red beneath the gilt oak leaves and tassels, and one could sit down without sneezing. The surface of the reception desk lay like a pool of dark water; had anyone leaned over to sign the register he would have seen his own distinguished features looking up at him as if from an ancient, much-varnished portrait.

The Major's eye moved back with a hint of anxiety to the dancing flame of the torch at the foot of the stairs. He was not accustomed to seeing a flame allowed to blaze unprotected in the middle of a room—but it was, after all, safe enough, firmly bracketed over tiles with nothing but the spiralling emptiness of the stairwell above. At his elbow, close to the torch, the gracefully inclined face of Venus had taken on a sly vitality with the dancing of light and shadow. What trouble she had caused, the Major mused, before they had been able to restore her to the softly glowing purity of white marble; that descent of dust which, year by year, had grown like black hair on her head and neck, on her shoulders and sloping breasts, had also found its way into the crevices of scanty marble cloth that failed to clothe her. Quite impossible to get at it with a feather duster! But he and Edward, fanatical and perfectionist, had decided she must be as white as snow; nothing less would suit them. So Seán Murphy had been summoned and the three of them, with starting eyes and bulging veins, had lifted her off her pedestal and staggered out of the door, around the house, down through the kitchens and into the laundry where the maids were waiting for her with scrubbing-brushes and a steaming soapy bath. They had set to work, blushing and tittering and teasing Seán Murphy as if what they were doing was somehow indecent. Then, rinsed and dried and wrapped in clean towels, they had taken her back and set her up once more.

All their spring-cleaning had been fun! The Major was smiling at the recollection. But as his eye wandered over the gleaming black and white chessboard of tiles his smile faded —for sitting on a white tile in the very middle of the floor was a plump grey rat. Almost immediately, startled by the Major's movement, it crept away under one of the sofas and vanished from sight. Frowning, the Major made his way towards the ballroom. This was something they had not envisaged when they had gone upstairs to make their grim harvest of cats. Those cats hadn't been eating the air! A steady grey stream of nourishment had been coming up into the house: rats from the cellars and the pond, mice from the fields and the barn. A cat, however wild and savage, can always be passed off as a pet. Not so with rats. Fortunately there was still a sizeable residue of appetites in the upper storeys. Perhaps the rats would remain out of sight until the guests had gone home.

The orchestra was playing a foxtrot. As the Major made his way towards the ballroom, the lively melody of "Dreamland Lover" grew louder, blending with laughter and the chatter of voices, the rhythmic movement of the dancers on the parquet floor which was shining like a pool of ice. What a fine time everyone must be having! Once again he allowed himself a touch of optimism about the success of the evening.

In the doorway he hesitated. He had seen Sarah and, although his mind continued to register calmly a variety of impressions which had nothing whatever to do with her, he was aware of a solid pulse throbbing in his neck and chest. Tonight he would propose!

The ballroom was decorated with banks of violets which added a sweet fragrance to the faint odours of cologne and perfume drifting from behind the delicate ears of the ladies and the heavier aroma of tobacco-smoke from the thickly moustached lips of their companions. Sarah was sitting beside one of these banks of violets, her face slightly blurred by a mist of green ferns. Behind her chair, with his right hand over his heart as if posing for a photograph, stood Captain Bolton, watching the dancers (of whom there did not seem to be a great many). It was Bolton's other hand which caught the Major's eye; the palm rested on the back of Sarah's chair but the fingertips trailed carelessly forward on to her shoulder. As the Major watched, he bent his head to say something to her, delicately encircling her naked upper arm with finger and thumb as he did so. The finger whitened for an instant, but Sarah continued to look straight ahead. Her face was dark and closed. She might have been unaware that Bolton was standing behind her.

Having started in her direction, the Major now changed his mind. He had a great deal of dancing to do; he

had cheerfully promised a number of the old ladies that he would dance with them. He began with a trembling but light-footed Miss Porteous, next came a waltz with the cumbersome Miss Johnston who made things difficult by wanting to lead, then it was time for a bewildered Mrs Rice to take the floor.

Edward was moving from one group of guests to another, making genial, incoherent remarks, red in the face and wearing an air of mingled triumph and discomfort in the tight grip of his tail-coat. The Major was afraid that this triumph might be premature. The guests had been carelessly chosen because, although there were a great many young men, thanks to the Auxiliaries, young ladies were in short supply. The twins, flushed and exultant, were besieged and claimed for every dance. Viola O'Neill was also discreetly holding court under the sharp eye of her parents, flirting with three or four young men at once. Even Sir Joshua's daughters were being paid considerable attention: their long, horse-like faces were turned continually to where their mother was sitting, for encouragement or advice. A doting smile would appear on her face, which was an older, more wrinkled version of theirs, and she would nod affirmatively. And this horse face—the Major's disabused eye noted as with flexed knees he foxtrotted a gasping and near-hysterical Miss Staveley round the floor—these equine features were repeated again and again all the way down the glittering ballroom, as if the Smileys had been reflected in a great hall of mirrors, from the oldest men and women to the youngest children. This was the face of Anglo-Ireland, the inbred Protestant aristocracy, the face, progressively refining itself into a separate, luxurious species, which had ruled Ireland for almost five hundred years: the wispy fair hair, the eyes too close together, the long nose and protruding teeth. "Ripon was right, in a biological sense as well as in several others, to marry Máire Noonan."

If only there had been more young people! No doubt it was this absence of youth which lent the guests the appearance of wax figures, museum curiosities, unconnected with the present era, the seething modern world of 1921. The Major peered round Miss Staveley's heaving shoulders. The handsome and distinguished young people from abroad were no longer to be seen. Even the lovely Miss Bond, who had briefly captivated him in the foyer, had vanished.

Thinking of the Auxiliaries, he cast a worried glance in their direction; they had stationed themselves near the buffet and were drinking copiously, becoming steadily noisier and more boisterous. But now they had discovered an amusing game: if there were no young ladies to be danced with, well, they would make do with the older ones. As the next waltz began half a dozen of them crossed the floor to bow and click heels in an exaggerated manner in front of as many old ladies. The ladies looked apprehensive. They perhaps remembered how these or similar young men used to threaten them with bayonets at the tea-table. Under the obligation to be good sports they accepted, nevertheless, and allowed themselves to be escorted on to the dance floor.

"The first time I came to the Majestic," the Major was saying to Sarah, "I went for a walk round the terraces with Edward and he told me about the hunt balls and regattas they used to hold here...the violins and the chandeliers and the silver breakfast dishes...I never expected to see it for myself."

"It's lovely, Brendan. This is how it should be all the time—with candles and flowers. It's almost too good to be true. D'you think there'll be silver dishes for breakfast? What a long time there is still to go before then!"

She was smiling at him warmly, with a trace of that innocent enthusiasm which he had found so disarming during her visit to London. Dancing had made the Major thirsty. He drank a glass of cold champagne and then another. He was in a strange mood, both sad and somehow optimistic at the same time. He told Sarah, pointing at the blue-black glass on the roof, how, up on the balconies above, the nannies and the children used to watch the grown-ups dancing. That was in the old days, at the height of the season, when the ornate gilt mirrors in every room in the hotel were busy reflecting the corporeal envelopes of titled persons and the attics under the roof were positively bulging with their servants. Those were the days! (In those days too Sarah would have thought him too splendid a match to refuse.) He drank some more champagne and gazed into Sarah's grey eyes, thinking...well, he didn't know *what* he was thinking...perhaps of old women, black as ravens, rummaging through the rubbish bins.

Sarah dropped her eyes to her glass, which was empty; she flicked it idly with her finger-nail and drew from it one thin, clear note of a painful beauty, over which the honeyed sighings of the violins on the platform had no dominion.

"Come on, let's go upstairs and see what the nannies and the children used to look at."

He gave her his arm. On the way out they passed Bolton, who was conversing politely with a feathered lady. He raised one eyebrow sardonically at Sarah as she passed.

Through the empty foyer and up the stairs Sarah clung tightly to his arm, humming under her breath.

"Well, you must tell me all the gossip, Brendan," she said at last. "I hear that Edward has been courting that sensible lady with the moustache."

"Oh come now!" protested the Major feebly. "She hasn't got a moustache. And besides, he wasn't really courting her in my opinion and anyway he's stopped now...But why do you want to know? Are you jealous?"

"Look at me, Brendan. Isn't it plain to see that I'm head over heels in love with him?"

In consternation the Major stopped. For a few moments she gazed at him with a sombre, tragic air; then, seeing his expression, she abruptly burst out laughing—a fresh, mocking laugh that echoed cheerfully all around them.

They had now reached the second landing. Reassured, the Major steered her along the corridor and into

one of the dark starlit rooms. They moved out on to the balcony; below them lay the ballroom, an immense, glistening bubble of glass. Another waltz was about to begin; the orchestra sat poised in its luxuriant garden of ferns, bald heads shining with perspiration, fingers crooked, bows at the ready. Hardly had the first few notes been played before the twins were out on the floor spinning round and round, disappearing every now and then into the fierce solar glare of one or other of the chandeliers. Presently three of the young Auxiliaries went spinning out on to the floor with their partners, Miss Bagley, Mrs Bates and a terror-stricken Mrs Rice. The Major watched, perturbed lest the young men might be taking their joke too far. A crash of breaking glass echoed up to them—but it was only some young chap who had clumsily swept a tray of empty glasses to the floor.

"I'm cold," Sarah said with a shiver. "Let's go inside."

In the darkened room the Major took hold of Sarah's arm and, in concert with his strange mood, kissed her sadly yet optimistically. It was one of those nights, he had the feeling, when everything isn't (as it usually seems to be) already settled; when one doesn't have to say to oneself: given your character and my character what harmony shall we ever be able to achieve?

"The moon will be coming up soon. Let me show you my favourite room."

As he opened the door of the linen room a great exhalation of hot air enveloped them. The night was mild, the kitchen ovens had been burning for several hours at full blast while the supper was being prepared, so behind this closed door the temperature had been mounting steadily all afternoon. Still, Sarah had said she was cold. The Major stepped inside and lit the candle beside his nest of pillows on the floor. He gestured for Sarah to sit down in the depths of the cocoon. She looked faintly surprised but did so, murmuring: "It's frightfully warm in here."

The Major was full of determination but uncertain quite how to proceed. He would have liked to take his coat off for a start (indeed he would have liked to take all his clothes off) but was afraid lest Sarah might put an unfortunate construction on any removal of clothes. He took his place in the nest beside her and for a few moments they kissed, thereby making real a scene which the Major had frequently evoked in his imagination. The reality however, turned out to be less satisfactory than the scene he had pictured. In hardly any time he was sweating profusely; his shirt clung to his back and his collar itched unbearably. Sarah was clearly also suffering from the heat; her brow was damp and shiny; as she raised a hand to brush away a stray lock of hair that was threatening to creep between their kissing lips he noticed that a dark stain had appeared under the arm of her grey silk dress. At any moment, he was afraid, she might decide that the heat was too much. While with a trace of desperation he continued to kiss her, he nerved himself to say what he had to say, to speak the words on which his happiness depended. He cleared his throat and...but no, he retired again for one final revision of the words in his mind.

Presently Sarah disengaged herself and said: "I'm afraid my dress will get crumpled." She hesitated for a moment, half expectantly, then with a sigh she got to her feet. The Major leaped up also and, mopping the perspiration from his brow, said jerkily: "Look here, I want you to be my wife." He could say no more. He could not move. He stood waiting there like a pillar of salt. He could see, however, that it was going to be no go.

Sarah's face had taken on a bitter, sly expression he had seen many times before. She said crossly: "Oh, I know you do, Brendan." For a while neither of them said a word, then she added: "This heat is frightful. I shall have to go and wash my face."

She turned away. The candle on the floor threw hulking shadows over the ceiling and the walls.

"Really, you're such a child. You haven't any idea what I'm really like...Oh, I'm sure you mean well, but it's quite out of the question...D'you know that I'm a Catholic? Of course you do. But do you even know what a Catholic *is*? You probably think it's some sort of superstition or black magic or...But no, forget all that, that's not what I want to say. It doesn't matter whether or not I'm a Catholic. It's simply impossible, d'you understand? And for heaven's sake stop staring at me with sheep's eyes like that! You're not the man I want and that's all there is to it...That's that. So please don't mention it again. I thought you were cured of all that nonsense. Now I'm going to wash my face!"

"But why not?"

"I told you. Because you aren't the man I want! Isn't that enough for you?"

"I suppose you want Edward, then."

"I want a man who isn't always trying to agree with people, if you must know. There! Now perhaps you'll let me go and wash my face...And for heaven's sake don't look so wretched. I'm sorry...but it would serve you right if I did marry you. You wouldn't like it in the least. No, don't come with me...I'll find my own way."

Left alone, the Major took off his coat and fanned his flushed, unhappy face with a pillow-case starched as stiff as cardboard. Craving sweetness, he delved into his pocket for the bar of chocolate he had put there. But the chocolate had melted into a mass of oozing silver paper.

When the Major had composed himself a little he went downstairs. The ballroom was empty except for an effete young man with a monocle who was strumming on the abandoned piano while a thick-set lady sat on a stool beside him eating trifle. This young man was G.F. Edge, the racing motorist, so the Major had been told

(but somehow he found it hard to believe). In any case, they paid no attention to the Major and so, although he was not in the least hungry, he wandered towards the dining-room where supper was being served.

Not for many years had such a magnificent display been seen in the dining-room of the Majestic: the snowy linen that cloaked the tables, the silver winking in the candlelight, the golden-crusted battlemented pies filled with succulent game, pheasants and ducks in quivering aspic, brittle and juicy hams cured with sugar and cloves and crowned with white frills, spiced beef the colour of mud, and steaming pyramidal vol-au-vents overflowing with creamed chicken, mushrooms and seafood. On long silver platters salmon stretched themselves, heads and tails shining and perfect as if caught a moment before (if one forgot the clouded, resentful eye) while, in between, all that glorious pinkness was gradually scooped away by the deft and deferential waiters imported from Dublin for the purpose. And besides all that, the salads and the soups, the pâtés and the hors d'oeuvres, the sucking pig (which at that very moment, as his eye fell on it, caused Edward to knit his brows pensively and think of his own plump darlings), the smoking pasties and pies, the delicate canapés, the cheeses that came not only from Ireland but from certain other countries as well (these cheeses, however, had been set at a table apart lest their smell offend the ladies). Nor must the desserts be forgotten: the mountainous creamy trifles that gave off the fumes of sherry and cognac, the trembling fruit and wine jellies, both clear and cloudy, aquamarine and garnet, pearly blancmanges and black fruit puddings smeared with melting slabs of brandy butter...and, of course, many, many other things besides.

On all this the Major, for whom life had become empty, cast a listless eye. Instead, he stationed himself by the sugar bowl on the coffee table and into his mouth morosely popped one lump after another, crunching them noisily. Sarah was not in the room. He was glad. He would never be able to speak to her again.

The other guests, their appetites unimpaired by love, were doing full justice to the magnificent food prepared for them. The elderly guests ate with dignity but more than was good for them, remorselessly, a little of this and a little of that (the Majestic's old ladies making the most of this opportunity to acquire a little nourishment), the others out of a mixture of gluttony and surprise that Edward should do things so well. Only the very finest of the guests (Lady Devereux, Sir Joshua and his wife and a sprinkling of other titled gentlemen) were heard to murmur "Wonderful!", "Absolutely capital!" but were not seen eating anything. Such groaning tables, of course, were an everyday sight for them—besides, people without wealth are obliged to eat not only for today but a little for tomorrow as well, "just in case"...Aristocrats and millionaires (and men of letters), on the other hand, scarcely have to eat at all: they can survive for days on a finger of toast and a plover's egg. The Auxiliaries ate with the zest of youth, their appetites sharpened by the wine they had drunk. They had gathered into a rowdy group of their own, full of laugh-ter and horse-play; a movement of this group afforded the Major a glimpse of white crinoline: the twins were standing there like queen bees at the centre of a swarm; tasting everything but too excited to eat, they laughed louder than anyone as the young men ribbed each other and played the fool. On the far side of the table a veil of steam from the tureen of turtle soup failed to conceal the pale elfin face that watched them, brooding. The Major caught Charity's eye and beckoned her over.

"Why haven't you asked me to dance?" she cried as she came skidding to a stop in front of him.

"You seem to be too busy," smiled the Major. "I just wanted to tell you not to forget about poor Padraig. He looks lonely and he's probably too shy to talk to anyone."

"Oh all right, where is he? But I'm sure he could talk to the old women if he really wanted to. What happened to Granny?"

"She's sitting in the lounge. Mrs Roche disarmed her, I gather."

Edward passed at this moment, tweaked Charity's ear painfully and whispered to the Major: "Would you mind holding the fort later on, Brendan? A few things I must do...have a word with Ripon and so forth..." He bent closer to the Major's ear and, tapping his breast pocket, added: "I have a cheque for him. The rascal must be getting short by now." He winked at the Major and moved on. Meanwhile Charity had departed and was dragging Padraig by the sleeve into the throng of young men. The Major, whose heart was still aching, did not feel in the least like holding the fort for Edward and was wondering peevishly whether he should not go and tell him so. Edward had halted not far from the table of foreign cheeses. He was standing by himself, hands behind his back in the "at ease" position, which was probably the most comfortable, given the tightness of his coat. He was gazing at his guests with a look of wistful satisfaction. "This," he seemed to be thinking, "was the way it used to be in the old days." But then his attention was taken by the large and jovial figure of Bob Russell, the timber merchant from Maryborough, who had come up to congratulate him. Arm in arm and puffing cigars, they sauntered back to the ballroom where coffee and liqueurs were being served.

"Why have you left those beautiful daughters of yours at home?" Edward was inquiring amiably as they passed the Major. "But of course! They're still at school in England!"

He turned briefly before leaving the dining-room and his face clouded for a moment. Perhaps he too was thinking that the shortage of young ladies was acute.

A few moments later it became more acute than ever, because the twins hared off somewhere with shrieks of laughter, dragging Padraig with them. Left to drink by themselves, the Auxiliaries' merriment declined and although there was now a general movement back to the ballroom they remained morosely where they were. Since the servants were no longer filling glasses they seized bottles of champagne and served themselves, moving out on to the terrace through the open French windows. The Major followed them and stood on the

threshold looking out. The moon had now risen, washing the stone parapets with a pale light; farther along, outside the open French windows of the ballroom, a galaxy of coloured lanterns swayed in the mild night air. The orchestra had begun to play once more, the sound of violins mingling sadly with the distant thud of waves from the darkness below. With a shiver the Major went back inside. He stood, hands in pockets, in the middle of the dining-room, which was now empty except for the servants clearing away the tables. He wished the ball were over so that he could be alone.

The Major stood irresolutely at the door of the ballroom. He still had some old ladies who had to be danced with. But, knowing that he must come face to face with Sarah, he was unable to bring himself to enter. Instead, he climbed the stairs to the second floor with the intention of returning to the balcony over the ballroom where he had been earlier.

The room was still in darkness but the door was open. A faint murmur came from the moonlit balcony that lay beyond the window. He paused—afraid that Sarah might have returned here with someone else—but now the speaking voice rose querulously, becoming audible; a confused string of obscenities reached his ears. The voice was unrecognizable, but an image flashed into the Major's mind—of a man he had seen mortally wounded sitting hunched in a shell-hole with his intestines in his lap like a mess of snakes, his blue lips still quivering with an unending rigmarole of curses while his eyes turned milky.

The Major blundered forward and stepped out on to the balcony. There was only one person there: a man leaning over the balustrade, his face illuminated by the bright pool of glass that lay beneath. It was Evans. A bottle stood on the stone parapet beside him. He paid no attention to the Major, perhaps had not even heard his footfall, but continued his muttered, gulping commentary on the dazzling scene below. On the whores and whoremasters, the bitches in heat and the lecherous old goats, the cowards and the swine who thought they were so high and mighty, their day would come, the wheel would turn...

The Major grasped him by the frayed collar of his shirt and wrenched him back from the balustrade with a hiss of splitting cloth. He was swaying on his feet and the Major had to hold him up, fingers dug into the stained lapels of his jacket. Sudden anger gripped him. He shook Evans with all his strength; all the growing bitterness of the last hour, of the weeks and months of receding hope, all the tragedy and despair of the years in France exploded in one violent discharge of hatred concentrated on the loosely swaying head in front of him. Slowly the pale lids crept down over the tutor's bleary eyes and a tear trickled down to the corner of his mouth.

"I hate them! I hate them all!" And he shuddered convulsively, his chin sinking on to his chest. The Major's anger abated suddenly. Evans's knees sagged and the Major had to stagger forward to keep his own balance. It was all he could do to keep him from falling. For a long moment he stood there, holding the tutor upright by the lapels. But then, with a sudden access of strength, Evans straightened up and tore himself free, throwing his head and shoulders forward over the parapet. The Major lunged after him, afraid that he was about to throw himself over. But Evans had begun to vomit copiously, a thick yellow fluid that splattered on the illuminated glass below. Unaware, the black and white gentlemen on the other side of the glass continued to revolve mechanically with the softly flowing silk and taffeta of the ladies.

"You're disgusting." The hand that the Major reached out to grasp Evans by the shoulder and help him back was shaking. Evans's eyes were closed and his features had relaxed into a strangely peaceful expression. It was difficult to get him back through the window and across the dark room. "You'll hear more of this tomorrow."

In the corridor a shadowy figure detached itself from a doorway. "Murphy, come here!" the Major shouted. "What d'you think you're doing there anyway?" But then he remembered that the uncouth old manservant had been instructed to keep himself out of the way until the guests had departed, for fear that his cadaverous appearance would upset the ladies.

"Never mind. Take Evans back where he came from and put him to bed. And clean him up while you're at it. You'd better lock him in his room until tomorrow morning."

The tutor's sour breath still seemed to hang in the room as the Major moved back to the balcony to retrieve the bottle left on the parapet. It was empty. He left it where it was. There was a pause in the dancing. The music had come to a stop; the musicians were mopping their shining heads and consulting each other. Suddenly across the empty floor the twins came into sight, towing the beaming but reluctant Padraig...and Padraig was dressed in a black velvet gown that reached to his ankles, with a string of pearls round his slender neck. The twins had decided to remedy the shortage of young ladies. With a grunt of dismay the Major watched them sweep out on to the moonlit terrace to join the young men, then he turned and hurried back downstairs.

But on his way back to the ballroom he was diverted for a moment by Bolton, who was lighting a cigar from the flaming torch at the foot of the stairs. He was just leaving, he informed the Major, since he had to be on duty early in the morning. Perhaps the Major would be so kind as to thank Edward on his behalf for a most pleasant evening—for the moment their host was not apparently to be found.

By now there were only a few couples dancing; among them were the twins with the young men they had selected and Viola O'Neill dancing with her father. Old Mr Norton was also there with a lady of middle age who wore a long-suffering expression as he ferried her hither and thither, his gleaming bald head stooped to

the level of her bosom. With so few of the guests dancing one might have expected that the surrounding tables and chairs would be overflowing, but this was not the case. The Major looked at his watch anxiously: not yet two o'clock. Could it be that the guests had begun to leave already? The Major's worried eyes moved from one group to another, trying to account for the guests who were missing. But he soon gave it up. There was Padraig to be seen to, and the twins must be given a sharp word, they were dancing in an outrageously abandoned fashion, brushing against their partners and throwing their heads back with wild laughter while the other guests watched them with pursed lips...they both must have had something to drink on the sly. But first, Padraig!

He was standing with several other people by the open French windows and there was something on the floor at which they were all looking with interest. Avoiding Mr Norton, who went trotting swiftly by, head and shoulders industriously lowered like a man pushing a wheelbarrow, the Major crossed the floor to see what it was. At first sight it might have been a blue-green muff or feather boa let fall by one of the ladies; but then, looking over Padraig's shoulder he saw that it had a pair of feet, a long neck and a tiny head crowned with a sparse diadem of feathers; the neck had been twisted round several times like a piece of rope.

"Where on earth did that come from?"

But before anyone had time to reply a gale of drunken laughter echoed from the darkness beyond the terrace and the Major understood. Padraig turned a pale, disconcerted face towards him.

"I asked one of them, if he'd give me a peacock feather. Then they threw that in!"

The Major stooped and picked up the dead bird; its body was still warm. As he carried it outside the neck swung to and fro, unwinding a few turns, and the long tail-feathers trailed on the floor. He dumped it on the terrace and returned. Again, from outside where the Auxiliaries were roaming with bottles in the darkness, there came that gale of laughter.

He cursed Edward silently for not being present, but, determined to remain calm, he lit a cigarette and made some bland remarks to the Prendergasts and Colonel Fitzgibbon, who had noticed the dead peacock. Then, excusing himself, he moved away, beckoning to Padraig. The boy must be made to go upstairs and change his clothes instantly!

But before he had time to speak there was a further unfortunate diversion. Charity, in full view of everyone, swinging herself round more and more recklessly in the arms of her grinning young man, had finally lost her balance and fallen heavily, bringing her partner sprawling on top of her. The orchestra faltered and stopped playing.

"The poor thing is *sto¯shus*!" cried one of the maids in the sudden silence. And the appalling silence continued while Charity, flushed and bemused, tried to extricate herself from her partner's limbs and get to her feet. The Major, mortified, signalled to the orchestra to go on playing and hurried over. By this time Charity, giggling helplessly, was being assisted to her feet by Faith and her partner.

"You and your sister had both better go and lie down," the Major told Faith sternly. "And see that they have no more to drink," he added to the blue-eyed Mortimer, who had been dancing with her and was now dusting off his companion Matthews. "I thought I could rely on you."

Faith and Charity were escorted from the room, crestfallen; the Major could not help feeling sorry for them.

The music had resumed. Mr Norton tirelessly continued to criss-cross the floor with his lady of middle age. The Major turned to the maid who was anxiously trying to attract his attention.

"What is it?"

"There's a gentleman and lady would like to say goodbye to Mr Spencer before they leave, sir." Lady Devereux had apparently already left. The Smileys were all on their feet and waiting expectantly. No doubt their departure would start a general exodus. Already two or three couples were consulting each other interrogatively.

"I'll see if I can find Edward. But do you really have to go so soon? The party's only just beginning."

By half past two the number of guests anxious to leave had swollen considerably, but still there was no sign of Edward. The ladies had long ago exchanged their flimsy dancing-shoes for more solid footwear and waited wrapped in furs. The men had found and used Edward's telephone to summon their chauffeurs and now stood, conspicuously overcoated, silk hats in hand, at the door of the ballroom, peering in distractedly in the hope of seeing, if not Edward, at least the Major. But by this time even the Major had disappeared.

The presence of these guests at the door (so obviously leaving but taking such a long time about it) had a debilitating effect on the resolution of those in the ballroom who had decided to stick it out until breakfast was served...for, after all, not everyone has the chance of attending as many balls as the Devereuxs and the Smileys. Every now and then someone would turn his head casually to see if the overcoated defectors were still there (and yes, they *were*!), then, looking thoughtful, would return his gaze to the almost empty expanse of dance-floor where old Mr Norton, stooped and perspiring but feet twinkling as industriously as ever, continued to plough his lonely furrow. He would have been altogether alone had it not been for the fact that there were a handful of the least distinguished guests (the young Finnegans for example whose grandfather owned the drapery) for whom a dance was a dance, no matter what.

By now it had occurred to several of the guests that, although it might be embarrassing to leave so early, it might be even more embarrassing to stay and find oneself eating breakfast *en famille* with the Spencers at a breakfast table set for two hundred.

"Where *is* the dratted fellow?" demanded the overcoated and outspoken Captain Ferguson in a loud voice from the door. He was no longer even referring to Edward, given up for lost and completely mad, but to the equally elusive Major.

"Well, we can't wait all night!"

And at last the defectors moved in a convoy of fur, perfume, silk hats and cigar-smoke towards the foyer. Dragging open the massive front door (the servants had evidently vanished to their own more amusing below-stairs revelry) they found themselves face to face with the very man they had been looking for, the Major. He was carrying in his arms a large bundle of dripping black velvet from which protruded two blue-white feet and a pale, whimpering face.

The Major stepped inside immediately, looking as surprised and disconcerted as the departing guests. Beyond him, in the dark drive illuminated here and there by the lamps of the waiting motor cars, a number of uniformed chauffeurs impassively watched this curious scene.

The Major hesitated for a moment or two, long enough for his dripping black bundle to form a small pool of water on the gleaming tiles, long enough for the departing guests to notice a dark snake of pond-weed dangling from one of the slender ankles.

"Ah, you're off then," the Major at last murmured somewhat grimly. "I do hope you've enjoyed your...ah!" His words ended with a grunt as the velvet bundle thrashed petulantly, causing the limp strand of water-weed to slither to the floor. The ladies in furs stared at it as if it were an adder.

Meanwhile the Major had turned and was striding swiftly up the stairs with his dripping cargo. He stopped abruptly, however, before he reached the landing and looked down.

"I'll say goodbye to you for Edward. I'm afraid he's indisposed."

With that he vanished, leaving only that sinister coil of water-weed as testimony to his passing. The departing guests cautiously groped their way out into the night.

As for the Major, he was carrying Padraig swiftly along the corridor towards the linen room, the warmest and driest place he could think of. The boy was trembling, his pearly white teeth were chattering. And no wonder! The water in the swimming-pool must be icy at this time of year. Kicking open the linen-room door he dropped Padraig into the nest of pillows and said sternly: "Now take that wet dress off immediately. I hope this will be a lesson to you, Padraig. If I ever find you dressing up as a girl again I'll throw you in the swimming-pool myself."

Padraig said nothing, but his whimpering increased in volume. The Major stooped and struck a match to light the oil lamp on the floor. By its light he could see that clouds of steam had begun to rise from Padraig's wet clothes. Poor Padraig! Not only had the Auxiliaries coaxed him with honeyed words to a tryst by the swimming-pool, not only had they thrown him cruelly in, they would also have left him to drown if the Major had not come to the rescue. Poor Padraig! He remembered how Sarah had once said: "With the twins everything has a habit of beginning amusingly and ending painfully."

In the corridor the Major paused to listen. Had he just heard a cry of pain from somewhere close at hand, perhaps from one of the rooms that lay along this very corridor or the one above? But all the doors were closed; from the linen room alone a thin trickle of yellow light daubed the carpet. Elsewhere all was dark. The cry of a girl? "One of the twins?" he thought anxiously. But he hurried on. He must get some brandy and hot water for Padraig lest the boy catch pneumonia. Perhaps, after all, it had only been the cry of a seagull swooping close to the house.

The number of guests collecting themselves in the foyer had increased, but they and the Major ignored each other. Outside, motor cars continued to arrive, illuminating the green lawns with their sweeping headlamps. A white-haired old gentleman seated on a sofa, palms resting with dignity on a silver-embossed cane, noticed the Major slipping by and wagged a stern reproving finger at him. But the Major paid no attention and hurried on. Hardly had he escaped from the foyer, however, when he came face to face with Miss Archer who said: "Those wretched young men are causing trouble in the ballroom. They've been threatening to shoot the orchestra if they don't go on playing. And they've been making the maids dance with them."

"My God! You haven't seen Edward? We must find him. Would you mind getting a hot drink for Padraig? He's in the linen room on the first floor. They threw him in the swimming-pool. Thank heaven most of the bloody guests have gone!"

The orchestra stopped playing just as the Major reached the ballroom. The music had grown hysterical, haphazard, a discordant scraping of violins, an outraged groaning of cellos that bore witness to the exhaustion and alarm of the musicians. Then, abruptly, in the middle of the most frenzied passage it had stopped. Now there was utter silence.

A girl was standing in the doorway. She moved aside to allow the Major to pass. It was Sarah.

"What's going on?"

But Sarah ignored him, intent on what was taking place in the ballroom. The Major brushed past her and went inside.

Edward was standing on the orchestra dais, his face dark and congested with blood, his massive body vibrating with fury. He was glaring down at the young men frozen like statues here and there on the empty floor. Behind him the musicians were swiftly and silently packing their instruments into cases and collecting their music. Three or four maids who had been dancing with the Auxiliaries melted away from the floor and

vanished.

Edward had begun to stride back and forth along the narrow platform with short, violent steps...a wooden music-stand got in his way, he kicked it aside with a deafening crash, then silence returned except for the ominous creaking of the boards under his weight. As he prowled back and forth his furious eyes remained on the faces of the young men on the dance floor.

Then one of the young men laughed. And at the same time a cold gust of wind blew through the open windows, swirling the curtains and fluttering the tablecloths, making the regiments of candles splutter and grow dim, sending up a blizzard of white petals from a wilted flower that lay beside a lady's forgotten handbag. And then they were all laughing, rocking, hooting with merriment as they strolled unconcernedly towards the French windows. Outside on the terrace they could still be heard laughing as they moved away into the darkness.

Edward stopped pacing. His shoulders sagged and he looked ill. A minute or two passed and then the Major strolled across the floor and looked out over the terrace to make sure they had gone. He only saw a brief glitter in the darkness as an empty wine-bottle flew up from the terrace below, hung for a moment and then plummeted towards the glass roof. It smashed through the roof in a diamond rain and exploded on the floor in a thousand fragments. Edward, Sarah and the Major waited motionless. Presently from the glass roof there came another deafening crash and shower of glass, but this time the bottle dropped unbroken into the empty cushions of a sofa. And that was the end. It was only now that the Major noticed there had been somebody else in the ballroom all the time: sitting on another sofa in the darkest and most obscure corner holding hands were the racing motorist and his lady. But nobody acknowledged their presence and in due course they disappeared without a word.

"Where have you been?" demanded the Major bitterly. "And thanks for leaving me to cope with everything."

"We'll talk about it tomorrow," Edward said curtly. Turning to Sarah he added: "I must take you home." They left the Major standing resentfully amid the broken glass in the middle of the floor.

Unknown to the Major there still remained two Auxiliaries at the Majestic. After Charity's fall the two young men who had been escorting them, the somewhat dubious Matthews and the clean-limbed Mortimer, winked at each other and hastened to assist the girls up the stairs. Charity needed this assistance; she had become extraordinarily sleepy and lethargic all of a sudden; she could hardly keep her eyes open or put one foot in front of the other. Faith, on the other hand, raced up the stairs unaided and even tugged at Mortimer's sleeve (which made Matthews wonder whether his great experience of women, which had led him to choose the more intoxicated of the twins, had guided him to such a wise choice after all) whenever Mortimer, who had become strangely talkative, hung back to chat with his friend Matthews. The truth was that Mortimer, though determined to put the best possible face on it in front of Matthews (to whom he had once, in a moment of weakness, confided the description of one or two fictitious conquests), was distinctly alarmed by the turn events had taken and was secretly wondering just what he was in for...that is to say, he already *knew* more or less what he was in for, having had (or almost had) a thoroughly nauseating experience in a brothel in France, one of those "reserved for officers" (one shuddered to think what those reserved for the other ranks had been like). Even now, chatting garrulously on the stairs about Jack Hobbs hitting long-hops over the pavilion, he had only to close his eyes to see glittering-ringed fingers parting thick white curtains of fat to invite him into some appalling darkness.

Gay as a skylark and with more energy than she could find a use for, Faith had now begun to climb using only one leg, her crinoline ballooning prettily with each hop—but even so she found she was ascending more quickly than the others. Back she came to tug at Mortimer's sleeve again, telling him that he was a slowcoach and that he should forget his beastly cricket and come on up and..."My God! Just look at Catty! You'd think she was sleep-walking!"

Indeed, Charity was swaying helplessly, loose-limbed as a puppet, divinely relaxed. Her eyelids kept creeping down and it took all her strength to force them up a millimetre or two to see what was going on. Climbing unaided would have been out of the question but fortunately Matthews's shoulder was under her left armpit, his powerful arm was wrapped round her back and a hand like a steel hook gripped the bottom of her rib-cage as if it were the handle of a suitcase (this hurt, she knew, but for some reason she couldn't feel it)..."Jolly decent of him to help me, anyway," she kept thinking.

"Hey! Are you all right, Catty?" Faith's grinning face was saying a few inches in front of her own, emerging out of a grey fog of sleep.

"Of course I am!" she said crossly—or would have said if she had not been so busy with the weight of her eyelids.

"Of course she is!" Matthews echoed her thoughts, though rather defensively. "She's as right as rain." But at the same time he was becoming increasingly anxious lest he had picked the wrong one. This one was *too* drunk—either that or not drunk enough. Fortunately, while his right hand, fingers dug deep into the soft, elastic flesh of her waist, was holding Charity up by the ribs, his left hand was gripping the neck of a bottle of chilled champagne that he had thoughtfully caught up out of an ice-bucket in case a further anaesthetic

should be needed. But what was the matter with that ass Mortimer? Was he showing the white feather in spite of all his big talk? In which case...

But meanwhile they had at last reached the second floor and Faith had picked out two adjoining rooms which she knew to be unoccupied. Having deposited one twin in each of them, the young men emerged for a hasty conference, Matthews suggesting that Mortimer might like to swap..."I think this one prefers you, anyway."

But Mortimer considered his honour to be at stake and rather haughtily rejected the suggestion, though he knew (and knew that Matthews knew) that he would have been only too glad to accept if it had not been a question of honour.

"But you aren't going to be a cad, are you, Matthews? I mean, your one is dead to the world."

"Matter of fact, you're wrong there. She's already getting interested..."

Matthews and Mortimer separated on this disagreeable note, the former with every intention of being a cad if he possibly could, the latter determined to put up a good show (or at least not to be sick like last time). Matthews, returning to the room where Charity lay fast asleep on a dusty counterpane, cast an expert eye over her inert form and saw at a glance that he would have to be quick.

It's not at all easy to undress someone who is unconscious —and Charity was wearing a great many layers of clothes. Fortunately Matthews was deft and experienced at removing ladies' garments, otherwise he might have been so discouraged as to give the whole thing up as a bad job, thereby losing a heaven-sent opportunity. Besides, he knew himself to be a good worker and was proud of his skill. This was something of a challenge, all the more so since the clothes Charity was wearing were unfamiliar: crinoline and petticoats and odd pantaloons with all sorts of hooks and ribbons and laces and safety-pins in places where one would not expect them. He lit the oil lamp, removed his jacket and made a rapid preliminary check to make sure that what ought to be there *was* there—and it was (for even divinely beautiful girls are constructed on the same general principles as their more homely sisters). Then he rubbed his chilly fingers and set to work, his eyes bright with concentration.

Charity was rolled on to her front, so that the eye-hooks that meandered up her spine could be unfastened one by one...but then something became stuck in front, so she had to be rolled on to her back, then on to her front again so that half a dozen white laces in granny-knots could be untied. Next he had to work his forearm under her stomach in order to lift her off the bed an inch or two, with the other hand trying to work the clumsy hooped skirt upwards...but he found this too difficult and had to stop and scratch his head in perplexity. It was clear that the only way was to roll her backwards and forwards working the skirt up a few inches at a time.

Each time he rolled her over Charity groaned, dreaming that she was crossing the Irish Sea to school in a black gale; giant waves swept her up and down, up and down...Of course she was never seasick...it would be too shaming if she was sick...but what if the boat began to sink? Up and down, up and down...Ah, no wonder it hadn't been moving, Matthews was thinking, there were a million pins he hadn't even noticed, he must be losing his touch...Now over she goes again, a firm shove on the hip and on the shoulder and..."No, no, straighten out your legs," he muttered crossly. "We'll get nowhere like that...It'll take us all night."

The temperature had been dropping steadily as the night wore on. By now it was freezing in the room. His fingers were stiff with the cold and lacked their usual dexterity, but he worked on without a pause. In a moment the first layer of clothing would be lying on the carpet. After that, things should go more smoothly.

Next door it was cold as well; at least Faith thought so. She was sitting in bed with her knees up to her chin, naked and shivering. The room was pitch-dark except for a faint orange glow that leaked under the communicating door from the oil lamp by which Matthews was working. Mortimer was striding up and down in the darkness. Although she could not see him she could tell more or less where he was by the sound of his voice and the creak of the floor-boards.

For some minutes he had been telling her about a master at school who had got drunk on Speech Day. Young, handsome, courteous, artistic, a wonderful athlete, the whole school had loved him from the loftiest prefect to the most insignificant fag until that day when he had gone weaving across the quad in gown and mortarboard shouting that the Matron was a flabby old bitch before the horrified eyes of a lot of chaps' parents...But Faith's teeth were chattering and try as she might she was unable to see the relevance of this story to their present situation. Was Mortimer trying to say that he was drunk? No, it couldn't be that. But what was it, then? Having failed, together with Charity and Viola, to understand and identify on her own person a fair proportion of the technical terms used in the brown-paper-wrapped book that Matthews had lent them, she was vague about what exactly was supposed to happen to begin with; but instinct told her that this sort of preamble was not necessary. Perhaps she had got undressed too promptly? On the other hand, what else was there to do? If only there had been a light burning she might have been able to see his face and get some clue as to what he was thinking. Mortimer had refused even to permit a candle to be lit. He had become hysterical when she had struck a match to see where the bed was. After that she had had to grope her way towards it in the dark. The whole thing was turning out to be decidedly odd and a much bigger bore than she had anticipated. Discouraged, she dolefully rested her trembling chin on her knees and wondered whether it wouldn't be best to give it up and start slipping on a few clothes again.

Mortimer was now telling her in a rapid, high voice about a fellow in the army who had gone for a trip on

a whaler before the war, all those mountains of blubber, cutting through the mountains of blubber with flensing-knives! Ah, he could have done with a flensing-knife himself...The truth was that he was finding it increasingly difficult to avoid the curtains of white fat in which the room was draped. But now, striding about excitedly in the darkness, he had completely lost his sense of direction so that presently, ducking to avoid some limp tassels of lard that hung from the ceiling, he caught his foot in a rug and crashed forward into the bed, winding himself badly. Seizing her opportunity, Faith cast aside her sheet and pinioned him promptly against the mattress planting lean, dry kisses on his lips.

As he recovered his breath it slowly dawned on Mortimer that the sensation of touching a naked girl wasn't at all what he had expected...Little by little the curtains of white fat began to liquefy about the edges. Soon they were sliding down the walls to the floor and melting into a colourless liquid that seeped rapidly away through the cracks in the floorboards. His hand touched one of Faith's shoulder-blades...splendid, hard as a rock, nothing flabby about that! Next it alighted on her hip-bone and pelvis...solid as an iron casserole, it would chime as clear as frost if one tapped it with a fork (no need to think now about the spongey tripes that might be cooking inside it). Then came the ribs, every one clean and hard as the iron bars of a railing, drag a stick along them and they'd chatter like a machine-gun, a jolly good show (provided one forgot about the two oozing octopuses that were busy squeezing slimily in and out behind the bars). "Really," he was thinking, "girls seem to be perfectly splendid little creatures!" But at this moment his hand, which had been hovering in the darkness over her ribs, swooped down to land by misfor-tune on Faith's ample bosom—which fled silkily in all directions, quivering like a beef jelly. A vast dough of white grease (which Mortimer had somehow failed to notice suspended above the bed) at this moment detached itself from the ceiling and dropped, engulfing him.

Next door Matthews was crouched low over the bed working on a last stubborn knot in the region of Charity's lower vertebrae; his mouth was open as he worked, partly from concentration, partly because he suffered from catarrh. As he bent closer, anxiously trying to see the ins and outs of this knot, the vapour that sped like smoke from his lips stirred the tiny blonde hairs running up Charity's spine, causing her to groan and mutter. For a moment she even tried to lift her head. Matthews shifted his worried gaze to her face. She was going to wake up any minute! That would be just his luck! She was already half-conscious and every few moments she would thrash out blindly with her legs; once she had caught him a painful blow on the elbow. Now that he had only one miserable knot left to deal with she would be bound to wake up and call the whole thing off!

His eyes moved to the bottle of champagne on the floor by the bed. Better give her some more to drink before she became sober enough to refuse it. He left the knot and shifted his attention to the bottle, hastily working the wire harness away from the cork. He had just begun to dig out the cork itself when he heard footsteps. He paused. He held his breath.

It seemed to come from from the floor below (in fact, he had just heard the Major carrying Padraig to the linen room), but supposing someone came up here and saw the light under the door! It would take some explaining away—him up here with a half-naked filly! He'd have to say he had just found her like that. Maybe he'd better give it up...But the sound had faded. All was silent once more.

He breathed again. In the room next door that idiot Mortimer had at last stopped pacing up and down and got down to business. Charity was lying peacefully again now. He judged that the champagne was no longer necessary. Putting the bottle down quietly on the floor by the bed he returned, rubbing his knuckles and blowing on his fingers, to deal with this last knot. It was definitely the last, he had assured himself of that...Charity was already naked to the waist; all that now remained was a wretched knee-length camisole, tied firmly round the waist with (of all things) coarse brown string. Really, the things girls trussed themselves up with! As it happened it was Faith who had tied this knot for her sister—and as a joke (Charity had not been able to see what she was doing behind her back) she had tied it as tightly as she could, one knot on top of another, so that Charity would never never ever be able to get it undone. Matthews had stubby, thick fingers which were stiff with the cold although he had tried warming them over the lamp. To make things worse, he was in the habit of biting his nails with the result that he was now picking away at the knot as clumsily as if he had been wearing gloves. He could cut it with a penknife, of course. He paused, tempted. But no; that would be unsporting. This knot was a challenge and he wasn't the kind of man to duck a challenge. He'd already got so far, besides, he didn't like to think of all his patient work going to waste. Breathing through his dry mouth, tongue between his teeth with concentration, he applied himself to his task.

And then his parcel was untied at last! It had taken him another three or four minutes before his diligence was at last rewarded. All he had to do now was remove the final wrapping; he would just have to roll her over on to her front and on to her back a few more times to ease the camisole off and then...he would have opened the small locked door leading into the garden of delight.

All this time Charity was being tossed savagely to and fro on stormy seas and by now she was feeling alarmingly sick. One moment she was rocking back and forth on the mail-boat with that dreadful lurching one feels as one first leaves the protection of the Howth peninsula and forges out into the open sea; the next she was shipwrecked and bobbing about helplessly in the water. It was icy cold and she had lost all her clothes—a huge wave had just come and turned her completely over, dragging away the last stitch she had on—and then somehow she was lying on her back on a rock and some appalling Creature (that resembled a black sea-lion

with a white shirt and black bow-tie, rather like an illustration from *Alice in Wonderland*), an appalling Creature was trying to dislodge her from the rock and send her sliding back into the black water...and now a moist pink tongue was licking her kneecaps and a scratchy moustache was tickling her thighs ...At this moment, as luck would have it, her roaming hand closed over a very cold, elongated stone and she swung it up and hit the Creature with it. With a soft moan the Creature vanished back into the water...but Charity continued to feel sick until at last she vomited enormously, volcanically, over the side of the bed. Then the waves calmed down and she felt very much better.

The bottle of champagne had not broken, however, when she hit Matthews (who was now lying on the floor with a fractured skull); her fingers had released it and it lay like a block of ice between her thighs. The cork, meanwhile, had begun to travel imperceptibly away from the bottle as Charity floated peacefully onwards (and Faith in the next room groped around in the darkness trying to collect up as many of her garments as possible). Presently it gathered momentum and exploded. A long cry of pain broke from Charity's lips as the freezing liquid bubbled over the warm skin of her stomach.

Downstairs the Major paused and thought anxiously: "One of the twins?"—but he had Padraig to think of and hurried on.

In the next room Faith paused in alarm at her sister's bloodcurdling cry and thought that perhaps, after all, it mightn't be such a bad thing that her own escapade had proved a failure—while beside her in the oily darkness Mortimer thought bitterly: "What a cad the fellow is! Taking advantage of her like that..."

Another person heard the scream. This was Murphy, who had been lurking in the shadowy corridor and seen the twins come up with their young men. When he heard it he chuckled; then his gaunt figure melted back into the darkness. As he went, the moonlight from an uncurtained window glinted momentarily on a long, curving blade, for he had brought a scythe up from the barn, to hone and grease it in the attic where he kept his belongings.

It seemed to the Major that the night had already lasted an eternity, but the clock on the mantelpiece of the residents' lounge (specially repaired and wound to mark off the bliss-ful moments of Edward's ball) had scarcely conceded three o'clock. A few moments ago he had caught sight of himself in a mirror unexpectedly: two eyes round with worry in a pale face had stared at him unblinking as an owl, making him think of shell-shock cases in hospital, men who used to sit up in bed all night, wide-eyed, smoking one cigarette after another as they tried to probe the darkness around them.

"I hope this will be a lesson to you!"

All the lessons that were being learned that evening! But what good did they do? By the time one had learned them it was too late. He would move on, but life would not go with him. Life would stay where Sarah was; all the great explosions of joy would take place in her vicinity.

"Drink it all up. Every drop. If it tastes bad you should have thought of that beforehand!"

The house was empty now and silent, except for an occasional faint scratching sound; the Major postulated a rat under the floor-boards. Edward had disappeared once more, leaving him to cope with everything as usual, but he was too tired to feel any resentment. Besides, in a moment he would go to bed.

The Major was standing beside the dying fire, resting one elbow on the mantelpiece, his hand sifting slowly through his untidy mass of hair. Next to him, huddled in dressing-gowns, sat the twins, looking pallid and chastened, each of them nursing an enormous glass of bicarbonate of soda mixed with water from which, wrinkling their noses in disgust, they sipped miserably.

"Anyway, you're sure you didn't do anything you shouldn't have done? It's far better to tell me now if you did..."

"Oh no, Brendan!" murmured Charity hoarsely, avoiding the Major's eye.

"What sort of thing do you mean?" inquired Faith more strategically.

"Never you mind. Just drink up. Come on now, take a deep breath and drink it down all in one go. It's the only way."

Half an hour earlier the Major had come upon a strange quartet proceeding slowly down the stairs. First had come Mortimer, grunting and dishevelled, wobbling dangerously under the weight of the limp and senseless Matthews (who had "bumped his head in the dark"). A few stairs above the labouring Mortimer the two sisters were supporting each other, pale as ghosts, their clothing disarranged and somehow...well, *different,* he could not help thinking (in their debilitated state they had left off some of the inner layers that had earlier exercised Matthews's skill to the utmost). With one dismayed glance at the twins the Major had leaped to assist Mortimer with his unfortunate friend; the "bump" was a bad one, the poor chap was out cold, though breathing steadily enough.

Once Matthews had been deposited on a sofa in the foyer the Major telephoned the camp at Valebridge and asked for an ambulance. "No, no, it was an accident," he had explained several times. In due course the ambulance arrived; the men who came with it looked around suspiciously for a while ("No, nothing whatsoever to do with Sinn Feiners. He simply bumped his head!") and then left with poor Matthews who still had not regained consciousness. Indeed, it was several hours before he finally came round and even then was unable to remember just how he had come to bump his head in the dark, an uncertainty of memory that was

to persist, together with bouts of double vision and absent-mindedness, for the rest of his life.

The twins had heaved a sigh of relief when they saw him go. Charity in particular experienced a surge of joy and for a moment almost forgot to appear more ill than she felt (she and Faith had had the presence of mind to powder their faces with chalk in order to incite sympathy and deflect punishment). She *did* feel ill, of course, *inside,* though luckily she had vomited the contents of her stomach. But her face in the mirror had looked all too shiningly healthy. It was boring of the Major to insist on them drinking this vile stuff, but it was comforting too in a way—after all, she had had a fright. Tonight, for once, she would remember to say her prayers!

At length, the twins in bed and brimming with bicarbonate of soda, the Major himself climbed the stairs, though not without checking once more in his mind that everything had been taken care of...The twins? Yes. Padraig? Sent home in dry clothes. The wretched tutor? Deal with him tomorrow. The guests? Well, nothing could be done about the guests. Sarah? Forget about her. Mrs Rappaport? Disarmed and in bed, as far as he knew. And Sarah? Forget about her. But how could he? He must. And Sarah? Think about her tomorrow, perhaps. And Sarah?

His room was bitterly cold; the sheets on his bed were damp and icy to the touch. Tired and in despair, this lack of comfort was almost more than he could bear. If only he had had a hot-water bottle! He lay there, craving physical comfort as, earlier in the evening, he had craved sweetness. Of course a hot-water bottle was out of the question. “All the same,” he thought, “I shall never manage to fall asleep like this,” as worn out by the happiness, disappointment, unhappiness, bitterness and chaos that had succeeded each other throughout the day, he fell asleep nevertheless, forgetting to blow out the candles at his bedside.

They were still burning when he woke a little later; in fact, they had hardly burned down more than an inch or two. He called: “Come in,” because someone was knocking at the door. He expected to see Edward appear; it was just like him to wake people up inconsiderately because he suddenly felt the need for reassurance. But no, it was the cook.

“Ye’re t’ come at once!” she exclaimed breathlessly. “The divil’s below!” And she gabbled a further torrent of words which the Major found quite incomprehensible. He stared at her in astonishment.

He had had very little to do with this woman since the time of Angela’s illness when he had been in the habit of haunting the staircase at mealtimes. Indeed, he had made it his business to avoid her because she still showed signs of being uneasy in his presence. All the more surprising, therefore, that she should be now standing at his door, her plump figure swathed in what looked like an army greatcoat, unlaced men’s boots on her feet, the grey hair that was normally tightly rolled into a bun on the back of her head frothing wildly over her shoulders.

“What’s all this?” he demanded sternly. “The devil? You must speak plainly and slowly. I don’t understand you.”

But the cook plunged on faster than ever, repeating the same mysterious phrases again and again while the Major tried in vain to fit them into some coherent pattern. Could she be speaking Irish? Or was it merely her defective palate, abetted, he suspected, by the absence of teeth?

“Wait!” he said severely (this sort of thing must not be encouraged). “I shall come and see for myself.” And he threw aside the bedclothes, causing the cook to back away apprehensively, her flow of speech suddenly arrested. He paid no attention to her but pulled on slippers and a dressing-gown, knotting it tightly round his waist. By this time the cook had vanished along the corridor, but as he hurried after her and turned a corner he saw a sputtering candle ahead of him, the flame dragged horizontal by her haste, the men’s boots slapping clumsily on her bare feet. As they descended the staircase the candle shining through the banisters made clumsy, swollen cartwheels that accompanied them down into the foyer.

The house was in complete darkness. Everyone had retired for the night. But no...a glimmer of light was still shining from under the door of the writing-room. The cook pointed at the door and stepped back.

The scene in the writing-room was a dismal one. It had proved impossible to clean all the rooms on the ground floor in time for the ball; rather than allow the guests to cover themselves in dust it had been thought best to seal off the most distressing places. One of the gas mantles was burning, but no answering gleams were reflected from the dust-laden furniture and woodwork; at best a stray gleam radiated from the glass fairy that Mrs Bates had given her life to place on top of the grandfather clock; the remainder of the Christmas decorations still hung from the corners of the ceiling, grey and sinister as the toils of a giant spider.

A small man was standing with his head directly interposed between the gaslight and the Major so that his face was in darkness. His elongated shadow stretched out gigantically over the open expanse of floor to engulf the Major—indeed, all the shadows seemed to stretch out from him and that single light behind his head, lending him the appearance of a black spider at the centre of another web. The Major failed to recognize the silhouette. But there was no mistaking the deferential yet agitated tones in which the man, advancing, began to speak. It was Mr Devlin and he regretted very much disturbing the Major at this unpardonable hour but he would surely be forgiven when the reason was known...(“Is the wretched fellow incapable of speaking straight?” wondered the Major, grinding his teeth).

“Yes, yes. What is it?”

It was his daughter, Sarah...she hadn’t come home yet and though he knew she was in safe hands...in short, he’d heard that the ball had terminated more early than was expected... mind you, everyone had said what a

great success it was... and therefore, because there was such trouble in the country round about...

"Sarah? What time is it now?" He had left his watch in the pocket of his waistcoat. He thought of the candles left burning in his room.

"Mr Spencer took her home...perhaps an hour ago, perhaps more. More, I should think. Where *is* Mr Spencer?" He looked round for the cook, but of course she had disappeared.

Grasping Devlin by the arm, he dragged him deeper into the room, nearer the solitary gas jet so that he could see the man's face. From the darkness there came a faint, distressed mewing and a dislocation of shadows. The cats had returned. For a moment he had thought that the mewing was coming from Devlin himself.

But Devlin had also begun to speak, in a high, frenzied tone which grated unbearably on the Major's nerves. He'd known as much! He'd warned her against it...But no, she wouldn't listen. No decent girl would show her face with those drunken devils on the loose. He'd warned her! They'd gone rampaging through Kilnalough not an hour ago and she hadn't come home...She'd been so intent on dancing with the quality, well, that was where it had got her. He'd seen the damage they'd done...they'd overturned the milk churns so that the main street was like a white river, Finnegan's window with a black, star-shaped hole in it...and the butcher's shop-window lay piled under the sill like a snowdrift! And they'd been dressed up in their finery, in their claw-hammer suits like gentlemen. Ha, fine gentlemen! And he'd heard girls screaming...But she'd not come home even then...It was he, the Major, who was responsible. She had been left in his care. He was not a gentleman. Indeed, he was a swine and a cad to leave the girl on such a night...Ah, a cripple and without protection...And Mr Spencer who thought that he could buy him, Devlin, with his money and his hypocrite's talk, what sort of a man was that? D'ye hear me?

The Major shook Devlin so violently that his last words were uttered in gasps. He fell silent then.

"Sarah will be all right with Edward. Nobody will touch her."

"Nobody, is it?" Devlin leered. "And where is she at this minute? Tell me that. All right with him, d'you say? Sure he's likely worse than any of them!"

"You're speaking of a gentleman!" snapped the Major. "Mr Spencer is a man of honour."

Abashed, Devlin fell silent. The Major peered at his face, certain that he had been drinking. For once the bank manager looked dirty and dishevelled; his hair, oiled and combed, had swung forward over his forehead, curving ridiculously upwards like a pair of horns. His trousers were secured with bicycle clips. "They're all the same," mused the Major. "Even when they hold responsible jobs they're liable to go to pieces at the first sign of trouble."

"You see, you came here on a bicycle. Heaven only knows how long you took on the way. Your daughter is probably back at home by now."

Devlin paid no attention, his eyes had strayed into the shadows and he was mumbling incoherently. "He's been most good...She was a cripple...the best doctors, indeed I am, sir, more grateful than I can say...Ah, it wasn't the sort of expense I'd be able to permit myself...He did everything for her! Nothing was too much..."

"You must go home, Devlin. Sarah will be all right. I'll answer for it."

But abruptly Devlin burst out: "He's been most good... He's been a swine!"

This cry echoed emptily around the panelled walls, shrill as a girl's scream. It was followed by a few moments of utter silence.

"You must go home, Devlin. Come along, there's a good fellow. I'll see you to the door." And the Major caught hold of the bank manager's elbow and dragged him round to face the door. As he did so he noticed a bluish light flare in Devlin's eyes. But it was only the reflected glint from the gas mantle. By the time they reached the foyer Devlin had recovered a little and was excusing himself in a low, monotonous voice for getting the Major up at this hour, he must be tired after the ball which had been, he had heard, a famous success, the Major must forgive him this liberty given the desperate circumstances,...the last time they had met and had their most enjoyable chat the Major had given him to understand that a certain young lady's well-being was of importance to him, had he not? and with all the drunken shouting and singing and smashing of windows and accosting of respectable girls he had felt it his duty to take the grave decision of calling for assistance...

"Shut up, for God's sake! Go home and have some sleep and we'll talk about it in the morning. It must be almost five. There! Now good night and go straight home!"

Devlin was standing uncertainly at the top of the steps. He seemed anxious to continue his apologies but the Major's patience was at an end. He slipped back inside the door and closed it. Then, without waiting to see whether Devlin was going to take himself off, he climbed the stairs to bed. "And Sarah?" he thought as he was climbing between the sheets.

"Wake up, Brendan! Wake up!"

The Major was floating in soft black water in a disused quarry. The depth of the water was so great that when he dropped a white pebble into it he could still see it minutes afterwards, winking in the darkness as it sank. Then he was sinking beside it, down and down. "Death is the only peace on earth," he thought as he was sinking.

"Wake up!"

A hand touched him and he sat up with a start. The room was black and he could see nothing. But he knew that he was not still dreaming: a hand was grasping his wrist, warm breath fanning his cheek.

"Who is it?"

"Where are the matches? I can't see a thing." It was one of the twins.

"What's the matter?"

"Brendan, are you awake?"

"Yes, what is it?"

"There's been a terrible fight downstairs. We think it must be the Sinn Feiners."

A match flared, illuminating Charity. She held it up above her head, looking for the Major's candles. Presently the match was swamped by darkness; then another match was struck, this time on the other side of the bed, and Charity was lighting the candles.

"We were too frightened to go down."

Unable for a moment to recall the events of the past few hours, the Major waited with instinctive dread for consciousness to start the first few rolling pebbles that would generate an avalanche of remembered disasters. Then, as one memory after another hurtled down on him, he heaved his drugged limbs over the side of the bed and massaged his face wearily. He stood up and for a while looked in vain for his dressing-gown. Then he realized that he was still wearing it.

"I'll go down and see. You'd better wait here and lock the door if you hear anyone coming. Get into my bed or you'll catch cold."

It seemed to him that there would never be an end to this blundering through the darkened, empty corridors of the Majestic. What time was it? Surely it should be light by now! But the black windows he passed were lit only by the reflected flame of his candle.

After the darkness of the corridor the study seemed glaringly bright. Still holding the candle and oblivious of the drips of hot wax that spilled over his clenched fingers, the Major stood in the doorway and looked about with shocked eyes at the bizarre scene of destruction that greeted him. At his feet the floor was littered with broken glass and tarnished silver cups. A framed cartoon by Spy which had once hung over the desk lay on the floor, its glass cobwebbed; the desk itself had been swept clean except for an upturned ink-well which was still leaking a steady black drip on to the dusty carpet. Even the air showed traces of the room's chaos—hazy with white powder, turf-ash scattered half across the floor from the embers of the fire, in which, moreover, a man's shoe lay smouldering. Beyond the fireplace a Welsh dresser had tilted forward to unload a shelf of books and half a row of dusty upturned brandy glasses on to the floor. As he watched, another glass crept forward, slithered off the topmost shelf, turned slowly in the air and dissolved in a bright puff as it struck the edge of the dresser.

In the middle of all this confusion Sarah was sitting, alone. She said calmly: "Go away, Brendan. Things are difficult enough already." And then, as the Major neither moved nor spoke, she added impatiently: "Edward is a fool, an absurd and pitiful creature. Mother of God! And as for my father... He seemed to think that he was actually going to kill Edward...Of course he couldn't even do that successfully."

Sarah was sitting with her legs drawn up beneath her in a deep leather armchair. Around her shoulders she had swirled a vast khaki blanket which hung to the floor in an irregular cone. One naked arm clasped the blanket to her chin. The Major's eye, stung by the nakedness of this arm, travelled away and was promptly stung again, more severely: this time by a door beside the desk that stood open to an adjoining room. He had never seen this door open before. Within he could glimpse an iron bed and a tangle of dirty sheets.

"Was anyone hurt?"

"Hurt?" cried Sarah gaily. "If they had managed to hurt each other perhaps they wouldn't have looked so ridiculous...Why is everyone here so ridiculous? Yes, you're ridiculous too, goggling at me with your sheep's eyes...Can you guess what happened? Did he cut Edward's throat? At least that would have made some sense...but no, not even that! He kept shouting that his honour was besmirched...as if he had any honour to begin with! He said that Edward had bought me with thirty pieces of silver...Naturally Edward couldn't find a word to say to all this. Oh, they make me sick, both of them. 'Now look here, Mr Devlin, can't we be sensible about this?' Ah, and my father was drunk, of course, or else it would never have occurred to him to assault one of the gentry, a member of the quality, mind you, a Protestant gentleman...one of his own customers at the bank. My God! Can you imagine his daring? Oh yes, and Edward... don't think that he was any better. He was worse...he was ready to grovel too...and I used to think he was a man with dignity, shows what a poor little fool I am. You should have seen them fighting, you'd have died laughing. They make me sick!"

Sarah's face had turned white and against this pallor her eyes seemed black and very large. As if to give substance to her words, she leaned forward, hanging her head over the arm of the chair as if she were, in fact, about to be sick. The Major took a step forward to comfort her, but stopped again. Lying folded on the arm of the sofa his eyes encountered an oblong of grey silk that might have been a woman's dress. He stood there, painfully absorbing every detail; when he turned his head away every tiniest thread was stitched into his memory. He was certain that Sarah was naked under her blanket. On her naked arm, near the shoulder, he noticed the blue mark of a bruise and in his mind's eye he saw Bolton standing beside her chair at the ball, his finger and thumb whitening around her soft skin.

"Where are they now?"

Sarah lifted her white face and stared at him without comprehension. Eventually she said: "Edward took him home when they'd finished fighting. I wouldn't go with them. What d'you think? They're probably the best of friends by now. Even before he left he was beginning to apologize. 'You'll understand my position, Mr Spencer...' and Edward was saying that he, my father, had every right, that he understood what it was to have daughters...Edward was terrified of him... I've never seen anyone look so shaken and guilty and wretched. It was disgusting!"

The Major stepped forward and knelt by the fire to pick the shoe out of the ashes; the leather sole was blackened and charred. He blew a blizzard of white ash off it and set it down indecisively in the hearth. A deluge of hot wax scalded his fingers, reminding him that he was still holding the candle. He threw it into the fire and picked the wax off his knuckles with a dull resentment, staring at his fingers. Sarah was weeping bitterly by now, but the Major continued to pick at his waxed knuckles. Then, when at last he had finished, he went to stand over Sarah's chair and took hold of her naked arm and tried to kiss her wet face. As she resisted he began to struggle with her, wrenching at the blanket that covered her: "You dirty whore!" He was certain that she was naked beneath the blanket. She struck him heavily in the face. He stepped back surprised, and after a moment said: "I'm terribly sorry, Sarah."

But Sarah did not seem annoyed. She merely said with indifference: "That's all right, Brendan. But now leave for heaven's sake. I couldn't stand another scene tonight."

"Can't I take you home?"

"No. I telephoned a friend to come for me. He'll be here in a minute."

His room was in darkness and he no longer had the candle he had taken downstairs. It was not until he had reached his bed and groped for the bedclothes that he remembered the twins.

"Are you awake?"

"Yes."

"It was nothing serious. You can go back to bed now. A bookcase fell over in your father's study."

"Can't we stay? It's almost morning and our beds will be freezing."

"Certainly not."

"Just for a little while?"

"No, of course not. Go back to your rooms."

But the twins made no move and the Major was too weary to argue. For a while he stood in the darkness thinking of nothing, then he took off his dressing-gown and got into bed. "Well, just for a little while."

It was comforting, he had to admit, to have a warm body beside him. Presently he had two warm bodies beside him, for one of the twins had slipped out of bed, around it, and in at the other side. He formulated in his mind the words of rebuke that would send them both back to their cold beds but his vocal chords seemed to be paralysed by weariness and despair—and so it was in the middle of this chaste, warm, heavenly sandwich that the broken-hearted Major finally fell asleep. A faint smell of wine and perspiration presently began to perfume the air around this peacefully sleeping bed, for not only had the twins forgotten to say their prayers, they had also forgotten to wash themselves.

By now, at last, it was beginning to get light at the Majestic. The breeze from the sea which had chilled the few remaining guests during the early hours had dropped again and all was still. In a few minutes it would be daybreak: the rising sun would warm the weather-beaten stone that faced the sea.

Presently Mr O'Flaherty arrived in his trap with the three lads who worked for him. He was the local caterer who had been commissioned to provide breakfast in the ballroom (the other firm of caterers having returned to Dublin after supper). He had retired early the previous evening in order to have his wits about him at breakfast-time and thus no news of the outcome of the ball had yet reached him. Certainly he was surprised to find everything so quiet—but that was hardly any of his business. By now the guests would have been sporting and dancing all night. Doubtless they were rather tired.

Laden with baskets of eggs and trays of bacon, the boys staggered after him as he made his dignified way round to the kitchens—which had been left in a shocking state (he clicked his tongue in disapproval). Mr O'Flaherty was a portly man, very red-faced, a Sinn Feiner by conviction but disapproving of violence (indeed, of any kind of excess). He disapproved of a good many things—at least, in general terms; in particular cases he was inclined to be tolerant. He disapproved of the Anglo-Irish "quality," who seemed to him idle, luxurious, and very often slow-witted into the bargain. He disapproved of Hunt Balls and similar shenanigans. But he had nevertheless a job to do and he intended to do it.

"Look at the filth of it...That's Dubliners for ye!"

While the lads were cleaning up the kitchens he went upstairs to fetch the silver. For it seemed that ordinary china was not good enough for these people: they must eat out of silver dishes and drink their coffee from silver pots. Edward had shown him where to find this glistening treasure and handed him the key to the cupboard where it lay. Mr O'Flaherty could not resist a momentary feeling of pride at being trusted in this manner, and perhaps this did a little to palliate the unpleasant thought that while Mr Spencer and his guests were eating off silver there were people in the West of Ireland with hardly a bite to eat of any sort.

The eggs were broken into cups ready for the pan, the rashers spread out in leaves beside the mounds of kidneys, the cauldrons of water brought to the boil for the silver pots of coffee or tea. When everything was ready Mr O'Flaherty took two of the lads upstairs with him, warm plates stacked up to their eyes, leaving the third to start the frying and toasting.

With a clean chef's hat set firmly on his head he advanced on the ballroom with short dignified steps. He was disturbed, however, by the unnatural quiet of the place. There was no sound in the corridor except, once, the distant scream of a cat. The walls gave back that special echo that one only seems to hear in deserted rooms. Still, rather than lose face in front of the lads by showing that he was perturbed, he made no comment. His face remained as grave and impassive as if everything had been perfectly normal. Besides, with these people one never knew how they would behave. Even if (and the possibility had occurred to him) he found them lying scattered all over the floor "stiff with the drink" his job was not to pass comments but to serve breakfast to those who could revive themselves sufficiently to partake of it—and this was what he intended to do. But in the ballroom there wasn't a soul.

Mr. O'Flaherty advanced into the middle of the floor with measured steps, his face still studiously impassive. Behind him the eyes that peered over the stacks of plates were positively bulging with surprise and wonderment. Ah, but now he had to look down at his feet for he was crunching through a litter of broken glass; in fact, there was broken glass everywhere and wilted flowers and cigar ends and heaven only knew what else! "What a rabble, did ye ever see the like?" he thought.

"Tell Christy to stop the frying till we see how much we'll be needing...Then bring up the dishes, toast, tea and coffee, as much as he's done."

He took a cautious look outside on the terrace, which was also littered with broken glass. "What were they doing at all?" he wondered. "Was it a battle they had, or what?" The sun had risen by now. It was going to be a lovely day. The smell of the countryside in the spring...he took a deep, contented breath, but then remembered his duty and, shaking his head regretfully, stepped inside once more to organize the boys at the buffet tables and tell them where to stand.

By seven o'clock there was still no sign of anyone wanting breakfast. The first dishes, though kept warm for a while with hot water, had had to be discarded and replenished, though it was a shame to waste good food.

"Stand up straight, Paddy, and stop your fidgeting or you'll get what's what."

Of the three of them only he was permitted to move. But still, it was hard on them standing there with nothing to do.

Presently, however, a peahen came in through the French windows with nervous steps, looking for the long-tailed blue-green magnificence that had been her mate. She picked around for a while amid the broken glass, watched by the three silent men in white hats and aprons. At length Mr O'Flaherty tore off a corner of buttered toast and, bending with a sigh, offered it to her in the palm of his plump hand. She took it and ate it distractedly, a faint breeze ruffling the biscuit-coloured feathers of her breast. Then she hurried fretfully back to the terrace to continue her search. She was Mr O'Flaherty's only customer that morning.

It was almost noon when the Major awoke. The maid was opening the curtains to let in a cascade of golden sunshine and the twins were still in bed with him, giggling fit to burst. For an instant he and the maid stared at each other in silent horror; then he had rolled the girls out of bed in a flash and with as much bravado as he could manage sent them on their way with a ringing slap on their fat bottoms. A furtive glance at the maid, however, was enough to tell him that this playfulness had, if anything, made the situation worse.

Edward was penitent. He had behaved foolishly and deserved the Major's contempt. He had been weak and knew it. He had slipped but, by a miracle, he hadn't fallen.

The Major supposed Edward to be referring to his physical relationship with Sarah and for a moment was cheered. But no, Edward meant falling as Ripon had fallen: in other words. becoming like putty in the hands of a Catholic lady, becoming enslaved to Rome. This was a slippery path which ended in marriage, which ended in turn by having one's faith torn out by the roots.

"Don't be absurd, Edward," sighed the Major, who would have asked for nothing better. "This notion of the Roman Church is puerile and your marvellous faith, if you ask me, is nothing more than a vague superstition which makes you go to church on Sundays."

"You don't know what living in Ireland is like."

"Oh yes I do. You forget that I've been living here for some time now."

Edward's face darkened but he was too harrowed to argue the point. "It was I who gave her up, you know, Brendan. Not the other way round." As the Major made no reply he added: "Could you give Murphy a shout to bring more hot water?"

They were in the laundry, where Edward was taking a bath. The boiler, strained beyond its powers by all the washing that had gone on before the ball, had gone wrong, but Edward's craving for a bath had been too strong to be denied. Sunk in the bath, a great urge to confess had come over him, or, if not exactly to confess (for he really hadn't done anything so very dreadful), at least to share his troubles with someone who might understand. Hence the presence of the Major.

At first the Major believed that he had been summoned to hear and sympathize about Ripon, because Edward had started to describe the scene that had taken place the evening before when, after supper, he had sought out his son to give him a cheque...how he had found Ripon skulking in the library, leafing through a book on urino-genital matters that he had idly removed the shelf. And what had he done with his wife? No doubt she was pining away in some ladies' retiring room. Ripon, in any case, was not showing much interest in her these days. On seeing his father he had started guiltily and replaced the book in the shelf. Then Edward advanced on him, flourishing the cheque. Ripon had taken it and read it (it was for a handsome sum) and had seemed puzzled...What was all this for?

"I know you must be getting short. Sorry it's not more, but I scraped up what I could," Edward had told him gruffly.

"But Dad," Ripon had cried, stuffing the cheque back into his father's top pocket. "You mustn't! I don't need it...Just take a look at this." And he had proceeded to pull thick rolls of banknotes from one pocket after another, dropping them on the carpet in front of him until his shoes were all but hidden by the mound of money.

"Look here, Dad, why don't you take some to help out with your expenses? No, I mean, go on and help yourself. There's plenty more where that came from." Ripon, his eyes moist with generosity, had stood there inviting his stiff-necked old father to delve into the pile of currency. "Take it all if you want to. Easy enough to get some more."

Edward had stopped talking. The Major had glanced at him sympathetically but had deemed it best to say nothing, sensing that the worst was yet to come.

The laundry was a vast, desolate cellar, a continuation of the kitchens; ranks of Gothic arches fled into the dim, greenish distance, each arch made of thickly whitewashed stones. Tubs, basins, a gigantic mangle with rollers as fat as pillar-boxes, a few trays of shrivelled apples from some summer of long ago, pieces of greasy machinery carefully spread out on oilskin but long since abandoned (belonging perhaps to the defunct "Do More" generator)—the Major looked around with melancholy interest.

Edward's head, the only part of him visible over the dark soapy water, was grey and wild-eyed. Most likely he had not slept at all. The business with Ripon had no doubt been humiliating enough—but it was the question of Sarah that was really causing him pain. It did not seem to occur to him that the Major might also still be sensitive on this subject; he was too occupied with his own distress. "How selfish he is!"

Murphy now appeared carrying a jug of steaming water. As he passed he leered knowingly at the Major—that wretched maid must have spread the news below stairs! Edward waited for the elderly servant to pour the steaming contents of the jug between his knees, then went on with his rambling description of how he had nearly fallen into the papist trap. He had been lonely after Angela's death, intolerably lonely: the Major (his "only close friend") in London with his moribund aunt, the twins not yet expelled from their school, Ripon away all the time and busy confecting his dishonourable marriage, the Majestic peopled as it was with its sparse platoon of guests from the last century, the melancholy Irish winter setting in...Was it any wonder that a cast-iron depression, like a bear-trap, had closed its jaws on him?

Edward, slumped in the bath, had sunk lower by degrees so that now the water rimmed his chin and a second haggard face floated on its placid surface.

A young person whom he was, literally, putting back on her feet. It had given him an interest. ("I can imagine," said the Major sarcastically.) And it had been Sarah, of course, Edward continued, not noticing the Major wince at the mention of her name, it had been Sarah, of course, who had made advances, who had led him on. Not that he was blaming her. He knew as well as anyone that it was the man's duty to be honourable, that women are weak; but all the same...

Edward stopped speaking and there was a long silence. With the stillness of the water his body had become dimly visible: the hairy chest, the massive white limbs...From the nether regions, that darker area that might have been a submerged water-lily, the Major averted his eyes with distaste. "How could any young woman possibly be interested in *that*?" he wondered glumly.

At length the Major cleared his throat. He wanted to talk about the ball. Perhaps by talking about it one might make its memory less terrible. But so far Edward had not said a word on the subject. All morning the old ladies had been chattering like parakeets, discussing it with any sentient being who came within earshot, servant or fellow-guest, it made no difference. The presence of Edward alone had stilled their tongues. Though outwardly calm there was something in his face, a lurking pain or fury...whatever it was, it had silenced the old ladies just as now it silenced his "only close friend," the Major.

"It was I who gave her up," Edward repeated. "That's something to be thankful for."

But the Major knew that he was not telling the truth. Besides, Edward's wounded pride seemed as nothing compared with his own absolute loss.

"You know, sometimes..." Edward began; his lips moving only a millimetre or two above the surface sent tiny waves out towards his knees.

"Sometimes what?"

Edward wearily rolled his eyes towards the Major and then dropped them again.

"Sometimes I even used to forget that she was a Catholic." And he shook his head, perhaps at the narrowness of his escape.

And so at the Majestic everything returned to the way it had been before. The gleaming tiles became dulled. Sofas as sleek as prize cattle lost their glow. Rooms that had been cleaned needed cleaning again while those that had been locked up were reopened, and still nobody could find the heart or the energy to take down the Christmas decorations (besides, presently it would be Christmas again). Two or three litters of rapidly growing kittens had more than restored the population of cats, although, for the moment, there was no corresponding decrease in the number of rats sighted. Mrs Rappaport's marmalade kitten (fertilized by heaven knew what hideous monster on a moonless night) caused a surprise (everybody had assumed it to be a tom) by contributing no less than half a dozen of these kittens...enchanting little fellows, though, that one simply couldn't help adoring as they wobbled blind and mewing across the carpet. But the cries of delight became muted when the kittens at last opened their eyes and six pairs of bitter green orbs were seen to be staring around with malice at the new world in which they suddenly found themselves.

The groaning tables of the night of the ball were now only a distressing memory as the food served in the dining-room returned to normal. One day at lunch, while the guests were sustaining themselves with an Irish stew ("A Chinese Irish stew," muttered Miss Johnston in disgust), a supplementary dish was brought in by Murphy. On it rested a large sirloin steak. Pushing aside his plate, Edward proceeded to cut the steak into small cubes and place the dish on the carpet in front of Rover who by now was almost totally blind, surrounded day and night by lurking horrors. Rover licked the meat experimentally, masticated one or two pieces, then lost interest. With a sigh Edward returned his attention to the Irish stew on his plate. A moment later the new favourite, the Afghan hound with golden curls, came skipping up, bent his long nose to the meat and wolfed it down in a flash. The guests watched him in thoughtful silence.

In the last week of April the Major, returning from a melancholy stroll in the park, met Edward crossing the drive by the statue of Queen Victoria. He stopped. Edward's service revolver dangled from one hand. From the other, dark spots of blood were dripping on to the gravel. He stared in alarm at Edward's stricken face.

"What on earth happened?"

"I shot Rover...He was getting old. I thought..." He peered at his dripping hand. "I thought I..." But with that he turned and went into the house, leaving the Major to borrow a spade from Seán Murphy and wander off in search of the body.

The hole he dug at the foot of an oak tree near the lodge was constricted by large roots. He should really have begun another hole in a more suitable place, but sadness made him stubborn. The result was that, in order to receive the entire dog, his hole had to be narrow and deep. So it was that Rover was buried standing on his hind legs, his shattered skull only a few inches below the surface of soil.

The Major had filled in the grave and was hammering it down with the back of his spade when he spied a delega-tion of old ladies approaching, well furred against the restless spring breezes. Miss Johnston was the spokeswoman. They had heard what had happened and had come with a suggestion: Rover should be sent to Dublin and stuffed. They would make a collection to pay for the work and present him to Edward on his next birthday. The Major thanked them but explained that the heavy bullet had smashed the dog's skull beyond repair. It would be hopeless, the dog was unrecognizable (all of which was untrue, but the Major could not bear the thought of Rover stuffed and in some debonair attitude, front paw raised perhaps, gathering dust for the years that still remained to the Majestic...It was bad enough to think of the poor dog begging below ground as the worms did their work). Later the Major learned that Edward, cradling the dog's head in his free hand, had accidentally wounded himself with the same bullet. But luckily it was only a flesh wound.

At about this time in Dublin a number of statues were blown up at night; eminent British soldiers and statesmen had their feet blown off and their swords buckled. Reading about these "atrocities" threw Edward into a violent rage. These were acts of cowardice. Let the Shinners fight openly if they must, man to man! This sort of cowardice must not be allowed to prevail...skulking in ambush behind hedges, blowing up statues...Had there been one, even one, honest-to-God battle during the whole course of the rebellion? Not a single trench had been dug, except perhaps for seed potatoes, in the whole of Ireland! Did the Sinn Feiners deserve the name of men?

"Of course, there *was* Easter 1916," suggested the Major mildly.

"Stabbed us in the back!" Edward bellowed with a kind of pain, almost as if he had felt the knife enter between his own shoulder-blades. "We were fighting to protect them and they stabbed us in the back."

“Well, not if one looks at it from their point of view, of course...Mind you,” he added soothingly as Edward’s features stiffened, “one has to consider both sides.”

A dispiriting silence fell on the room. The Major decided that it would be a sign of strength not to press the matter. Edward inspired more pity than anger these days. Privately, though, he retained his conviction that it was rather amiable of the Sinn Feiners to prefer attacking statues to living people—a proof, as it were, that they too belonged, or almost belonged, to the good-natured Irish people.

“You don’t suppose they’ll have a shot at Queen Victoria, do you? Perhaps we should think of getting her moved a bit farther away from the house...” But Edward merely curled his lip contemptuously at this further proof of the Major’s lack of martial instincts.

The Golf Club these days was thronged with members whom the Major had not ever seen there before: fat, wary men with copious moustaches who cupped their ears whenever the “troubles” were mentioned but said very little, contenting themselves with an occasional mild reminiscence of Chittagong or Cairo or some other place under foreign skies. They seemed to be waiting uneasily for something; perhaps even they themselves did not know what it was. They would stand there, hands in pockets, staring moodily out of the club-house windows at the acres of blowing grass. Nowadays not so many players would venture out there; and all those who did, like Boy O’Neill, carried rifles in their golf-bags. Once or twice, indeed, distant shots had been heard over the hum of conversation in the bar, causing the drinkers to fear the worst: a massacre at the fourteenth hole, bodies spreadeagled on the velvety green or bleeding in bunkers. But no, presently a laughing, windblown group would come into sight on the fairway of the eighteenth and as they came up towards the club-house one or other of the party would be seen swinging a putter in one hand and a dead hare in the other. Not that they would have minded a “scrap”—some of them were young and brave, others middle-aged and fierce, and none of them had been to the war in France.

For the most part, though, the members stayed in the bar drinking whiskey-and-sodas and waiting. There were still a few ragged, shivering caddies waiting to besiege any plus-foured gentlemen willing to risk themselves in the open spaces—but their numbers had decreased considerably over the winter. Now only the very young and the very elderly remained. And the others? Perhaps instead of hefting golf-bags on their shoulders they were roaming the hills with some flying squad carrying rifles for the I.R.A.

“Hello, Major.”

“Oh, hello, Boy...Didn’t see you there.” O’Neill was leaning on the bar, his shoulders two great bunches of muscle outlandishly swollen by the thick sweater he was wearing. More aggressive than ever, he had recently acquired the habit of grinning sarcastically after anything he said, whether it was supposed to be humorous or not. The Major found this habit upsetting.

“Seen old Devlin?”

“Can’t say I have, Boy.”

“Giving us a wide berth these days. Too bad because I’ve a joke to tell him. Listen. It’s about a girl called Mary from Kilnalough. Mary goes to England in rags and comes back a year later in fine clothes and throwing away money right and left. Meets Father O’Byrne who says: ‘Tell me, Mary. How did you get all that money?’

“Says Mary, shamefaced: ‘Oi became a prostitute, Father.’

“‘What’s that you say?’ cries Father O’Byrne in a fury.

“‘Oi became a prostitute, Father,’ says Mary again.

“‘Ah, sure that’s all roight,’ says Father O’Byrne with a sigh of relief. ‘Oi was after thinking you said you’d become a Protestant!’”

Laughter from one or two of the men at the bar near by. But these were the old hands. The Colonials (as the fat, wary men with moustaches had come to be called) looked blank, being more used to a division of people by race than by religion. This sort of thing was too subtle for them. After all, a white man is a white man when all is said and done.

“Very funny,” said the Major without enthusiasm. He had heard the story before.

Across the room, sitting in an armchair under a portrait in oils of the Founder, the Major noticed young Mortimer. He went over to ask him how Matthews was getting on. Mortimer stood up politely and offered the Major a chair, causing him to think: “At least some of these young fellows have been properly brought up.” And really there was no denying it. Mortimer was a fine young fellow, been to a good school, nicely spoken, good at games...really Charity (or was it Faith?) could do a lot worse. The only trouble was that although he obviously came from a decent family, this family just as obviously had no money or they would hardly have allowed one of their offspring to join the riff-raff in Ireland for the sake of earning a few shillings a day. Still, it was a shame. A nice young fellow, though rather more nervous than one realized at first sight.

Matthews, it seemed, was much better. Still a bit groggy, of course. That bump on the head had turned out to be rather a bad one. But Mortimer had another, much more sensational piece of news. Had the Major heard about Captain Bolton? He had left Kilnalough after a frightful row with his superiors. Dismissed for insubordination. In short, he had told them to go to hell! And he’d immediately gone off to Dublin with an Irish girl. Who would have thought it of Bolton... having a love-affair on the quiet?

“The girl was at the ball at the Majestic. You may remember her?” The Major remembered her.

“You wouldn’t have thought it of old Bolton, would you? I mean, he always seemed such a man’s man. They say that if she so much as looks at another man he knocks her cold on the spot!”

"How d'you know about all this?"

"One of our chaps was up in Dublin the other day and saw them together in Jammet's. There was a scene with some fellow who was staring at her. Personally, I thought she looked a bitch, didn't you?"

At the end of April the last of the great spring storms blew in from the north-east and once more all the windows in the Majestic were rattling in torment, while the chimneys groaned and whined like unmilked cows, half threatening and half pleading, and draughts sighed gently under doors like lovelorn girls. At the same time curious cracking sounds were heard, difficult to identify; perhaps the sort of sound one might associate with the breaking of bones. Difficult, also, to say where they originated; they seemed to come dully through the walls or the ceiling, even up through the floor once or twice—or so it appeared; with the howling of the wind and the noise of the breakers outside it was impossible to be sure.

The Major was worried, of course, and sometimes went to investigate. Something had snapped, he could *feel* it, the special vibrations of something breaking somewhere; one can always tell when something breaks. But when he pulled himself out of his armchair and, puffing his pipe thoughtfully (so as not to alarm the ladies), sauntered into the next room or the one above, expecting to see diagonal cracks appearing in the walls...well, there was never anything to be seen. All was silent. He must have imagined it. But one knows perfectly well (thought the Major) whether one is imagining something or not, and he *knew* this was real. Besides, other people heard it too. Crack! And one or two of the ladies would look up vaguely, not wanting to make a fuss and not really trusting their worn-out old ears. Then, since nothing had actually happened, they would drop their eyes to the fingers which nowadays seemed all joints, one joint on top of another, strung like fat beads, all this time patiently knitting in their laps (but no longer able to sew)...and then a few minutes later: Crack! It would happen again. And this time even the Afghan hound on the hearth-rug would prick up his ears and go sniffing round the walls or doors before he was diverted by noticing someone asleep in a chair who needed to be licked awake, or one of the ladies trying to smuggle a peppermint from handbag to mouth without being nuzzled by his long greedy snout.

"Did you by any chance hear a cracking sound just then?"

But Edward, concerned about the possibility of a tidal wave swamping his piglets, shook his head.

"Listen for a moment."

But there would only be the sound of wind and rain, the groaning and the sighing, and Edward would become engrossed in his problems once more so that when it did come, he still did not hear it.

Remembering the bulges, real and imaginary, which he had discovered with Sarah, the Major moved aside the sofa in the lounge. The root throwing up the parquet blocks had swollen from a forearm into a thigh—thick, white, hairy and muscular. The Major thought it best to roll the sofa back promptly over this obscenity.

That night he lay awake listening to the wind and the waves, thinking that he might have been alone in a great ocean liner, drifting in the eye of a storm. Instead of decreasing with daybreak, the storm continued to mount throughout the following morning. By the afternoon Edward had become seriously concerned about the welfare of the piglets. They had not been fed since noon the day before. All this time they had cowered without physical or moral comfort in the roaring black squash court. Something must be done. But in this weather one could scarcely put one's nose outside, let alone walk a quarter of a mile, so he waited for a lull standing by one window or another with an unread newspaper trailing from his fingers.

"Almighty God! Did you see that?"

The Major had glimpsed a volley of slates climbing out into the driving sky from one of the roofs to windward, perhaps from one of the out-houses. He waited to hear them smash on the rain-scoured terrace beyond, but he heard nothing.

At four o'clock it grew dark. They decided to wait no longer. Wrapped in oilskins they battled across the drive and round the Prince Consort wing in order to get to windward of flying slates, Edward carrying half a sack of cakes and currant buns. Head lowered, one hand crammed on to his hat and eyes half shut against the lashing rain, the Major struggled in Edward's footsteps. The air was full of dead leaves, twigs and branches stripped from the creaking limes and maples beside the potato field. Cold rain seeped into his collar. So difficult was it to see where one was going that when Edward stopped a few paces ahead to gaze back at the hotel the Major blundered into him.

Edward's eyes were lifted to the black, rainswept hulk of the Majestic, his thick locks of grey hair writhing and flickering like snakes in the screaming wind. In that dim light his head appeared more massively sculpted than ever; beneath the heavy frontal bone his eye-sockets were pools of shadow and his cheekbones, glistening with rain, might have been carved by crude strokes of a chisel. With one hand he grasped the sodden sack of confectionery, with the other he pointed up at the building, shouting wordlessly at the Major. But the Major did not need to be told that there was something wrong; he could see for himself the gaping black hole in the roof of the servants' wing, he could see the slates blowing away into the swirling rain, free as petals...a sudden strong gust and a flurry of them would lift to soar away end over end into the darkness. And the black hole grew steadily larger like a woollen sleeve unravelling. Presently white wooden beams became visible.

Edward tugged at his arm and plunged on into the rain. They reached the lee of the high wall that ran down to the sea from one terrace to the next. There was a narrow path here which the Major had never

noticed before, and broken steps thick with weeds which clung wetly to his ankles. It seemed strangely quiet in the shelter of the wall and the going was easier. But as they made their way down towards the lowest terrace the rain increased to a deluge. The Major licked his lips and tasted salt from the clouds of spray whipped up by the wind to cascade on to the boiling mud around them. By the time they had turned and headed with the wind behind them at a reluctant gallop towards the invisible squash court, the water had seeped inside the Major's oilskin and he had lost his hat which had blown off his head and sailed ahead into the darkness.

"That's strange. They usually come to meet me. They must be frightened."

With the outer door dragged shut it seemed, by comparison with the roaring wilderness outside, very still and quiet in the squash court, despite the drumming of the rain on the glass roof and the muffled thunder of the breakers, now only a few feet from where they were standing. Edward had taken a lantern from its nail on the wall and while he was lighting it the Major peered into the darkness in search of the piglets, listening for the rustle of straw. The ammonia smell was even more intolerable than on the Major's previous visit; with every breath it seized his nose and throat. He longed to be back outside in the gale of fresh air. Edward did not seem to notice it, however. He was emptying the contents of his sack into a filthy wooden trough and cooing gently to attract the attention of the piglets. The iced cakes, buns and barm-bracks had amalgamated inside the sodden sack into a glutinous mass and dropped into the trough with a carnal, sucking sound...But even this failed to produce the piglets. The interior silence remained unbroken.

"Can they have got out?"

Frowning, Edward lifted the lantern and took a few steps forward on to the squelching straw. The Major, who had stayed where he was (the thought of treading in that mess revolted him), watched the rim of light creep up the far wall—on which, crudely smeared in scarlet, were the words: SPIES AND TRAITORS BEWARE! And he knew instantly what the scarlet was and where it had come from. Edward's eyes were on the ground, however, expecting to see sleepy piglets emerging to greet him, so he continued to advance until his lantern light stole over a friendly, pliable snout, on to illumine the sleepy eyes and drooping, pointed ears...and then over emptiness (except for a dollop of intestines and a discarded corkscrew tail). Between the ears and the tail there was no longer any pig. The pig had gone.

A sharp intake of breath—a sound which the Major never forgot. And then Edward stumbled forward with his wildly swinging lantern, making the walls rock.

When Edward emerged and stood beside him once more (not yet having spoken a word) the Major glanced down and noticed that his shoes were bright scarlet, oozing, the lace-holes bubbling with scarlet liquid. On the threshold of the door he left one, two, three red footprints...But then they dissolved under the lashing rain.

"If she looks at another man he knocks her cold!" Of all the Major's troubles (of which there was no shortage) this was the one which preoccupied him the most. It was also the one he could do least about. More precisely, it was the only one which he could do nothing at all about, except wonder and distress himself.

He knew that it was futile. After all, he was not a complete fool. He knew that now there was really no further hope on earth of a successful union with Sarah. Apart from everything else, he now bore her a considerable resentment. Even if they met, this resentment would prevent him (probably against his will) from being friendly. Doubtless one day it would fade into indifference and allow him to be friendly again; but it would only disappear *on one condition*: namely, that he was no longer in love with her. Thus, his only hope of success depended on his not wanting to succeed! An appalling but not uncommon situation in the game of which the Major was so painfully learning the rules.

Meanwhile, although he did his best to put her out of his mind by concentrating on the other manifold troubles at large under the roof of the Majestic, she continued to emerge in random but painful thoughts that sprang sharp-clawed out of the hidden lair in his mind to which they had been banished.

"What sort of gentleman would 'knock a girl cold'?" he found himself wondering with amazement, even while he was examining a truly alarming crack which he had discovered in the wall of the writing-room behind the faded tapestry. But for all he knew this crack might have been there for years! And then, what sort of girl would allow herself to be repeatedly "knocked cold"? It was all quite beyond him, both the man and the girl (and, come to that, the crack in the wall). He simply did not understand. He tried to imagine himself knocking a girl cold; but it was easier to imagine himself flying up into a tree and singing like a blackbird.

Then, later on, while he was standing, hands thrust gloomily into the pockets of his jacket, by the gatepost at the end of the drive and looking up at the notice posted by Edward: TRESPASSERS FOUND TAMPERING WITH THE STATUE OF QUEEN VICTORIA WILL BE SHOT ON SIGHT. BY ORDER and thinking: "But he's gone clean out of his wits! He's trying to provoke them!"—while staring up at this defiant and reckless object, he found himself thinking instead: "But how often does she 'look at other men'? How often is she 'knocked cold'? Is it likely to damage her brain?" And his thoughts would meander away, low in vitality, convalescent, as if he had really been sick (and perhaps he really was sick), round and round like tired animals in a circus ring...to arrive at last at the exit (which looked strangely similar to the entrance), concluding that it certainly couldn't be very good for one to be continually knocked senseless.

But no, it wasn't that at all...It was the intimacy which distressed him. Sarah felled in a restaurant for

fluttering her eyelashes at a head-waiter; Sarah felled among the teacups at a Viceregal garden party for a lingering glance at some young officer; Sarah felled in Jury's Hotel for looking out of the window...His mind, tired and dutiful, furnished him with any amount of these images. And they were always together, Bolton and Sarah, and he was always excluded (attempts to imagine himself stepping forward to correct Bolton with a classic uppercut proved hopeless). Bolton and Sarah...

Late in the evening, while listening patiently to Miss Bagley complaining that a maid had taken up residence in the room next to hers and the cook in the room opposite, it occurred to him that now, at this very moment, it was quite likely that Sarah and Bolton were preparing to get into bed together. His vitality dropped a few points lower and the muscles of his face became numb with despair; the moustache on his upper lip felt as heavy as antlers. He explained carefully, nevertheless, to the indignant Miss Bagley that the servants' wing was uninhabitable: the roof had been taken off as cleanly as the top off a boiled egg.

On returning from the squash court his watery footprints had diverged from Edward's bloody ones and made their anxious way along dim corridors to "below stairs" where they were baulked from proceeding any farther. A foaming cascade of water was pouring down these stairs, and farther on down where they continued into some cellars which he had never visited. Odd bits of bric-à-brac slipped gently down from one stair to the next: pieces of wood, a coloured picture of the Holy Virgin, scraps of newspaper, rags of cloth that might have been underclothes or antimacassars, a sodden Teddy bear.

Weeping and shivering, a young girl in maid's uniform, drenched to the skin, sat with her ankles in the torrent. The Major, still wearing his oilskins, had picked her up since she refused to move by herself and carried her back and down the other stairs to the kitchen, which was fortunately still warm and dry, depositing her without explanation on the kitchen table before the astonished, wild-eyed cook (who had never entertained a high opinion of the Major's morals and sanity). Heaven only knew what she had thought!

He described the pertinent parts of this experience to Miss Bagley, and to Miss Johnston, Miss Devere (who had returned to the Majestic after a brief and unsatisfactory flirtation with the outside world) and Mrs Rice, who had come forward with similar grievances. And he listened carefully while they demanded with indignation whether it was a "free-for-all," guests henceforth to "fight it out" with the servants for the use of bathrooms and other amenities; and said that no, of course not, that he was sure they wouldn't want the poor servants to sleep out under the stars and catch pneumonia (even though, as the hastily arriving Miss Staveley had just pointed out, "they were only servants") and that it was, again *of course*, only a temporary measure, while the roof of the servants' wing was rebuilt. But they knew, and he knew, that the roof would never, this side of paradise, be rebuilt—which weakened his argument to some extent.

And all the time, even while he listened to the reassuring tones of his own voice, he could feel the extraordinary sloth of the hurt muscles of his smile, unable now to prevent himself from thinking of Bolton and Sarah making love. But perhaps, finally, the searing quality of this thought had a good effect. It helped to cauterize his festering emotions. At first he imagined that Sarah, with brutally parted thighs, was being violated—but later, simply worn out with caring, he became hard-hearted with this weakness and said to himself harshly: "Look, she wouldn't do it if she didn't enjoy it!"

True, Sarah was a woman. Therefore she was physically suited to accommodate men. There was no violation, except to the Major's feelings.

On his way to bed the Major, who had by now stayed in so many different rooms at the Majestic that he very often became confused, absent-mindedly presented himself at the door of a room he had been occupying a few days earlier. In the light of a candle he was astonished to see a young girl standing naked by the wash-basin. Without embarrassment she turned and smiled at the startled Major—who withdrew with a hasty apology. There must be a new guest in the hotel whom he had not yet come across! But surely that was impossible, for nowadays the servants came directly to him for their instructions. He found the incident most puzzling.

He had reached his room (the right one this time) before he realized who this new guest must be. It was simply one of the maids who had been obliged to move out of the servants' wing. And this was the very matter that he had spent the evening discussing with the old ladies.

Later, lying in bed, he mused: "She could have been a lady for all the difference there was...Of course, without clothes on everybody looks the same. They look just like we do." And he remembered thinking on some occasion during the war how, with all the distinctions of class effaced, one dead body resembles another...and...and...

These democratic notions must have soothed him, for he began to feel drowsy. Yet even as, hands in pockets, he strolled peacefully away into the tall waving grass of sleep, baleful yellow eyes were watching him, and then...Ah! The thought of Sarah once more pounced and clawed his sensitive heart.

"You really sympathize with Sinn Fein in many ways, is that not so? No, no, don't bother to deny it, Major. With me... och, I'm just a useless old man, you know, everyone says so...with me you don't have to pretend. Well, you must leave now before it's too late. This wretched affair in Ireland is none of your doing. No doubt you haven't helped matters, but that's neither here nor there. Now, if you've a grain of sense, you'll leave while you still have a chance."

“I can’t leave with the way things are. The hotel’s in a dreadful mess.”

The Major had called on old Dr Ryan to ask his advice on what should be done with Edward, about whom he was becoming progressively more concerned. Edward was seldom to be seen these days. He spent a great deal of time out of doors engrossed in some work he had undertaken in the grounds (not even Seán Murphy had been able to tell him just what this work was). Once, on his way up the drive, the Major had glimpsed Edward’s massive silhouette standing on the topmost roof, outlined against a bank of white cumulus clouds over Wales. On another occasion, while feeding the dogs in the yard (Evans the tutor had left on the day after the ball without waiting to be sacked, taking with him all Mr Norton’s silk shirts which had been drying on a line), he had heard harsh laughter echoing amid the slates and turrets overhead—but then there had been silence, and no reply when he had called Edward’s name.

What could be done to improve Edward’s state of mind? But Dr Ryan, who as usual appeared to be fast asleep, had shown himself disinclined to talk about Edward. Instead, he had kept on insisting that the Major should leave, which for the Major was quite out of the question.

“Very well. If you want to act like a young fool and get yourself in a scrape...!”

Yes, yes, but about Edward? If, for example, he could be persuaded to take a holiday for a few weeks? But the old man was impatient with the Major’s theories and laborious qualifications as to Edward’s state of mind. Edward was a confounded nuisance and had been raving for years!

“But the holiday?”

“Yes, yes, take the old divil away and see he never comes back!”

The Major ground his teeth with exasperation and thought that it was really high time the old buffer retired. He was becoming more senile every day.

Naturally, when the Major suggested to Edward that it might do the twins good if he took them away for a few days or even longer (“I could look after the hotel while you’re away”) Edward looked at him in amazement. Leave Ireland at a time like this! At the very moment when one must stand firm! Only yesterday his property had been abused; a warning notice he had placed on the gate-post had been removed. The guilty party must be found and punished!

The Major (who was himself the guilty party) sighed and stared at his finger-nails. Edward was clearly inaccessible to reason. But perhaps the whole thing would blow over, the “troubles” would sort themselves out, Edward be restored to his senses. Although mild, the Major was a stubborn young man and determined, in any event, to salvage whatever he could. The twins should be sent to England to stay with their aunt, the one deemed “fast” who was married to a clergy-man, it couldn’t be helped. Besides, she was unlikely, in the Major’s opinion, to prove “faster” than the twins already were. Mrs Rappaport should also be dispatched. Perhaps the guests might be encouraged to leave as well...

“Do whatever you think best, old man. I leave it in your hands,” Edward replied vaguely, with the air of someone who has more important things on his mind. And he stared into the distance, cracking his knuckles and looking insane.

When the day came for the twins to leave neither they nor Edward seemed in the least upset by their departure or by the prospect of separation. On the platform of Kilnalough station Edward grabbed a handful of blonde hair on each side of him and said: “Will you behave yourselves in London?”

“Yes, yes!”

“Will you?”

“Ouch! Daddy, you’re hurting!”

“D’you promise?”

“Yes, yes!”

And with that he bundled them into their compartment and rejoined the Major, who was the only member of the party to be moved by this leave-taking. Still, he was glad to see them out of danger. He only wished Mrs Rappaport had agreed to leave also, but he had only succeeded in arousing her obstinacy. She loathed Calcutta; always had. Refused to go there. The heat was appalling.

“Calcutta? But nobody wants you to go to Calcutta!” A long and debilitating argument had ensued. She agreed that she would be safe there. But safety wasn’t everything. One had one’s duty, after all. She would stay where she was. She remained quite deaf to the Major’s protestations. Once, fleetingly, she seemed to grasp that the Major wanted her to go to England, not to Calcutta, for she exclaimed: “I’m not pregnant, am I?”

“Good heavens! I certainly hope not!”

“Well, the climate here is perfectly suitable.” During this baffling conversation the huge cat that crouched on her lap like a furry bulldog stared piercingly into the Major’s eyes. But at last the Major acknowledged defeat; sensing this, the cat relaxed and rubbed its head against the hard leather holster which Mrs Rappaport now habitually wore strapped round her waist (the calm and practical Mrs Roche had taken care to remove the cartridges, however). The cat yawned and licked its paw to wash its face. The audience was at an end.

One success (the twins) and two failures (Edward’s holiday, Mrs Rappaport). Next the Major turned his attention to the Majestic itself, afraid that the collapse of the building might be imminent. The Major, of course, knew himself to be anxious by nature and inclined to get things out of proportion. Yet he still believed that he could hear the curious cracking sounds which he had first heard during the roar of the storm. Now

that all was quiet and tranquil one should have been able to hear them quite clearly. But the fact was that, although he could *feel* them, he could not hear them at all. It was merely an abrupt sensation of strain, followed by an ominous relief—a sensation that might be represented as the snapping of rotten branches under water. No doubt it was pure imagination. Nevertheless, in order to set his mind at rest he telephoned an architect in Dublin by the name of Delahunty and explained his fears, asking him if he would come down and look the place over.

Delahunty was a confident, jolly man of middle age who had been recommended to the Major by a mutual acquaintance. He laughed at the Major's anxiety; he knew the place well, he said. He had often stayed there with his parents as a child. Solid as a rock! One might just as well expect Dublin Castle to fall down. But if the Major really wanted reassurance he'd be delighted to come and have a look round. It would be good to see the old place again after all these years. If it was a nice day he might even bring his swimming-costume and take a dip in the swimming-pool...Was it filled at the moment? well, yes...though, strictly speaking...that was to say, there was water in it...Capital! The Major should expect him on Tuesday. And Delahunty, who was a busy man, had rung off before the Major had time to append any more of his laborious qualifications.

On Tuesday he duly made his appearance, a bald, tubby man with sparkling eyes who greeted the Major as if they were old friends. Splendid to see the old place again. Donkey's years since he'd been in this corner of Ireland. Needed a bit of spit and polish by the look of it but solid as a rock. After all, it wasn't the paint that counted but what was underneath. Look, now that he was here why shouldn't he stay for supper as well? They could put his name in the pot, couldn't they?

"By all means."

Ah, they knew how to build in those days. They didn't just throw a house up with a couple of bricks and a lick of mortar the way they did nowadays. See, Major, listen to that—and he rapped the wall of the corridor with his chubby knuckles.

"It's quite a relief to hear you say it. I'd begun to imagine things."

"You haven't a thing to worry about. Take my word for it." And Mr Delahunty, with a smile, indulged the Major by going with him, even so, to take a look at the crack behind the tapestry in the writing-room. Nothing structural, he declared, simply an "easing of the brickwork." Happened in all old places. But the upper storeys? The dry rot? The place the Major had put his foot through?

"You're bound to find that some of your woodwork doesn't come up to scratch. 'Tis the damp in the air that does it. Any old house in Wicklow or Wexford will be the same. But that's not to say they're going to fall down. Far from it. When you feel like it, Major, do a bit of re-timbering. Take your time. There's no hurry. The old Majestic will still be here long after you and I are dead and gone."

"There's no need to take a look upstairs then?" Mr Delahunty laughed out loud at this. Taking the Major's arm he said: "Look here, Major, you can say what you like against me but I know my buildings. Take it from me, this one will last another couple of hundred years if it lasts a month. There it is. Say what you like against me..." He hesitated, as if he half expected a denunciation from the Major. As none came, however, he added quickly: "Now let's go and have some of that lovely tea you mentioned."

The Major had gone to some pains to organize tea for himself and Mr Delahunty in the privacy of the writing-room, which he had taken the precaution of locking earlier in the afternoon.

Curiously, however, after his first cup of tea Mr Delahunty's conversation languished, his amiable barks of laughter became intermittent. He even failed to respond to one or two, admittedly rather dull, anecdotes the Major found himself recounting.

"Tea all right?"

"Oh, splendid. Absolutely top-hole."

The Major attempted several topics, regretting that he knew so little about architecture. Finally he tried to inter-est Mr Delahunty in the situation in Ireland today, a subject on which he surely had a great deal to say. But although he smiled and murmured vague replies he seemed preoccupied. His eyes roved absently around the walls and the ceiling. He appeared to be listening for something. When the maid, coming for the tea-tray, slammed the door he jumped violently.

Presently he looked at his watch and held out his hand to the surprised Major.

"But I thought you were staying to supper?"

"Appointment I forgot about, old chap. Maybe another time."

As they took leave of each other in the foyer Mr Delahunty's eyes continued to rove absently here and there.

"Well, I'm glad to hear there's nothing to worry about. You've taken a load off my mind."

"Oh yes, you haven't a thing to worry about," murmured Delahunty and once more before leaving, though rather cautiously, rapped the wall with his chubby knuckles.

Now that the Major's mind had been set at rest about the structure of the Majestic it seemed less important to him that the guests should be encouraged to leave. However, the collapse of the building itself was not the only factor involved. There was also the increasing violence in the countryside, where the Majestic stood in vulnerable isolation. There was the simple absurdity of continuing to run the place as a hotel when it had long

since ceased to resemble one. Above all, there was the deterioration in Edward's state of mind (not to mention the suspicion that he'd gone clean out of his wits) since the slaughter of the piglets. Bacon off the menu for ever, so the cook had been instructed. Revolvers to be laid out with the knives and forks in case of emergency at mealtimes. Clearly the fewer strains on him the better. Sooner or later, in any case, the guests would have to be got rid of. The Major was still haunted by the harsh laughter that had echoed over the rooftops.

But some of the ladies had been there for a very long time indeed. They had lasted through the winter; they had a right to stay through the summer as well. Of course they had no real rights at all. They had simply been there for so long that they seemed to have acquired the right to stay for ever—that is to say, until they died, which they would presumably do eventually. But the process might still take a considerable time.

The Major went amongst them and intimated vaguely, nothing definite yet, of course, that one of these days it mightn't be such a bad idea if they gave a little thought to where they would be moving on to after...well, after what? After Edward went completely off his head, perhaps...After the I.R.A. established their headquarters at the Majestic (and good luck to them!)...After the unforeseen, whatever it turned out to be, had happened...What could the Major say that would not be unsuitable?

He was so vague that he succeeded only in alarming them. They listened unsympathetically. Gradually they became indignant. The Major fell to a lower point in their esteem than he had reached since the day he had put an end to their punitive shopping expeditions. First they found themselves having to "fight it out" with the servants for the use of the bathrooms (the axiom that the servants "never washed" and at home kept coal or potatoes in the bathtub seemed to have proved faulty). First that and now this. It was intolerable. They had a jolly good mind to leave! The Major, eyes on his shoes, nodded miserably and looked chastened, having forgotten for the moment that this was precisely what he wanted them to do anyway.

"All I really meant was that Mr Spencer has decided against taking in any new guests—with a view to closing the place down eventually."

But the ladies were not soothed, particularly as Murphy chose this moment to shamble forward and announce that a party of young gentlemen had arrived.

"But that's impossible!" cried the Major, dismayed by the speed with which he had been unmasked. "Tell them they can't stay."

"But the master does be saying they can," countered Murphy with relish.

The Major hurried off to find Edward and remonstrate with him. But Edward had already welcomed the party, half a dozen young undergraduates from Oxford spending their vacation in Ireland in order to get to the bottom of the Irish question. He was full of enthusiasm. They were Oxford men! At last a chance for some intellectual discussion...They had chosen to make a special study of Ireland and discuss matters with various strata of society, a real attempt to get to grips with the feelings of the Irish people, not just the Shinners! There was no gainsaying the fact, young people today took a more direct, more sensible and generally less hypocritical approach to politics than the older generation. They were imbued by a new sense of social justice..."No, no, Brendan, I can see you smiling but it's true. We can learn from the young if we keep our ears open. Besides, they're only here for a night or two." And Edward went on to describe how, long before the war, he had eaten a splendid dinner in All Souls... Ah, the quotations from Aristotle and St Thomas Aquinas! The shellfish, too, had been magnificent. And the port peerless.

There was nothing to be done about it. The Major was turning away when Edward added: "By the way, a parcel didn't arrive for me from London, did it?"

"Not that I know of. Something from Fortnum's?"

"No, as a matter of fact. I wrote away for one of these things I saw advertised in the paper." He fumbled in his pocket and at last located a newspaper clipping which he handed to the Major. With raised eyebrows he read that Messrs Wilkinson's Sword Company was offering bullet-proof waistcoats—steel within silk, weighing only five pounds. "Send us the following particulars and we guarantee you a perfectly fitting garment. Waist and chest measurements, sloping or square shoulders, hollow or round back. Five guineas well spent would be the means of preventing a fatality."

"Would you say I have a round back?"

"Oh, I shouldn't have thought so."

"Ah, well, thanks...D'you suppose they're any good?"

"Afraid I never met anyone who wore them."

"Just thought I'd ask. It's not that I'm getting the wind up or anything like that. It's foolish, though, to risk a fatality for a ha'porth of tar. That's the first thing they teach you in the army."

Five of the undergraduates had been correctly identified by Murphy as young gentlemen, rather noisy and talkative ones. From a first-floor window the Major watched them dubiously as they sauntered out on to the lawn where Seán Murphy had been instructed to set up croquet hoops. The sixth, however, was an older man, taciturn and rather self-conscious. He sometimes laughed when the others laughed but not quite so spontaneously. If he cried: "Good shot, Maitland!" or "Your turn, Bunny!" or "Bravo, Hall-Smith!" it was usually to echo one of the others who, for the most part, addressed him with distant politeness or ignored him altogether. Later, when they came in for a specially arranged tea with cucumber sandwiches (served in the gun room to inhibit the ladies) the Major learned that this older man's name was Captain Roberts and that, yes, he had been "up" when the war broke out. And yes, it was a bit hard getting back to one's studies—at

least, he added with an agonized smile, he'd found it so at first anyway. But now, of course...And his sad, shocked eyes returned to the faces of his high-spirited companions.

Presently, the latter having drunk their tea and eaten their sandwiches as unconcernedly as if such things were an everyday occurrence in their lives (as no doubt they were), they returned to their game on the lawn and Captain Roberts trailed after them, a walking reminder of the follies of the older generation if his young companions had needed a reminder (which of course they did not).

The Major viewed dinner that evening with foreboding. There was a faint possibility that Edward, who seldom appeared for meals these days, might forget to attend. Before anyone else arrived, however, he was standing at his chair in the dining-room. On each side of his own seat three empty places had been reserved for the young men: the places of honour, a fact which did little to mollify the indignant old ladies.

The undergraduates arrived late and somewhat out of breath after ragging through the corridors while changing for dinner. There had been an attempted debagging of Maitland, who was the elected butt of the party. Then someone had pinched one of his socks and thrown it out of the window, so that when he followed the others into the dining-room he was wearing odd socks and looking so humorously aggrieved that the others could hardly suppress their laughter.

But Maitland was promptly forgotten when the impatient Edward showed them to their places. In fact they positively goggled with amazement. Laid out at each place beside the silver cutlery was a...revolver! Amazing! Everything people said about Ireland was true! The Irish were completely mad! They hardly dared catch each other's eye.

Only Captain Roberts, gloomily eyeing the dim and distant contours of the room, seemed to have noticed nothing unusual. While they were waiting for soup to be served he absently picked up the revolver set at his place, spun the empty chamber, hefted it for a moment in his palm, then put it down again, picking up a silver fork instead. Having twirled it briefly between finger and thumb, he replaced it carefully, peering in a worried fashion across the table at the three bright and gleeful faces of his companions opposite. What on earth was the joke *this* time? Not for the first time since the vacation had begun he wondered uneasily whether he might not have lost his sense of humour.

"Pass the word along," Bob Danby on his left whispered, groaning with pain, into his ear. "What can the last course possibly *be*?"

So it was the revolvers set out with the cutlery that was arousing the mirth of his companions! As he passed Danby's joke on to Bunny Burdock on his right he reproved himself for not having noticed—though, as a matter of fact, he *had* noticed, assuming merely that the hotel had rats. In the mess dug-outs in France they had been in the habit of blazing away throughout the meal at any rats scampering by—otherwise the beggars would have eaten the food off your fork. He cleared his throat, on the point of describing all this to young Hall-Smith opposite, but then he thought better of it. These young chaps listened politely, of course, when he talked about the war. On one occasion, however, while he was describ-ing some "show" or other, Maitland had said: "Oh, give the bloody war a rest will you, Roberts? It's been over for three years!" Of course Maitland had had a few beers and no doubt he had been egged on by his desire to please the others. Still, it was all past history now, all that; no reason why they should be interested.

Meanwhile an argument had started between the huge craggy-faced individual at the end of the table who must be the owner of the place (he was hardly obsequious enough to be the manager) and Bob Danby, who was their spokesman for political and intellectual matters (and was strongly fancied as the next President of the Union). And Danby seemed to be in particularly splendid form this evening.

"But what you're saying isn't the least bit logical," he was now protesting. "Although I agree that the Irish people may not be the most intelligent in the world I simply can't believe that they would *voluntarily* choose to elect bandits and murderers, as you call them, to handle their affairs...Come now, that really *is* a bit steep, sir!"

"Tell me then what they've done except ambush unarmed men from behind hedges, shoot innocent people, drive cattle and plunder farms and generally bring the country to her knees, eh? Tell me!"

"You're missing the point," groaned Danby, throwing up his hands in mock despair while the others watched him with amusement (old Danby was off again!). "The point is *democracy*, plain and simple. Only a few days ago Sinn Fein swept the country in the elections as they did in 1919. For every seat in the Southern Parliament except the four from Trinity they were elected without opposition. Look, sir, I'd even go as far as to say that if the majority of the people actually *want* to be governed by murderers (though I don't agree that they are for a minute) rather than by us British then they have a perfect right...after all, it's their business. I mean, have you even read Rousseau's *Le Contrat social*? The fact is that in 1919 the Irish people elected the people they presumably wanted...Why should they elect people they didn't want? The result was that Sinn Fein won seventy-three seats and the Unionists only won twenty-six...Now if that isn't a clear expression of the will of the people frankly I don't know what *is*!"

"What did they do when they were elected?" demanded Edward, mastering himself with difficulty. "They refused to take their seats in Westminster! Is that responsible behaviour? If they were anything but a worthless bunch of braggarts and corner-boys they'd have gone to do their duty by the people who elected them instead of running around with guns."

Danby had listened to this outburst, nodding and smil-ing at his plate as if this was exactly what he had

expected to hear.

"Very well, then. Why didn't they go to Westminster? It's a fair question. Why didn't they? The answer is because they knew it wouldn't do any good. What did Parnell ever accomplish? Nothing at all in practical terms. And Redmond? Even less. The point is that the Sinn Feiners knew very well that they could talk themselves blue in the face in the House of Commons without it doing them the least bit of good. They had to make a stand. Now I don't condone violence, of course, I'm a pacifist...as I think we all are here..." He looked round at the other undergraduates, who nodded their support. "But it can be argued that the source of the violence was not on the Irish side at all. The original and *motive* violence comes from us British who have been violently repressing them since Cromwell and even before that..."

"Don't talk such utter bilge, boy!" snapped Edward, a purple flush rising to his cheeks. "I know a murderer when I see one! If you'd lived in Ireland as long as I have you wouldn't talk such drivel. You talk as if they're patriots when they're just a stupid and vicious rabble, out for what they can get!"

"Well, I don't know that I can altogether agree with you there," replied Danby with an irritating smile. "Shall we think of a few examples? How about that Lord Mayor of Cork chappie?"

"I know who you mean," piped Hall-Smith. "The one with the gorgeous name. What was it? MacSwiney..."

"That's the fellow. Went on hunger-strike and starved himself to death for the cause he believed in. To say that he was out for what he could get is absolute tommy-rot, sir, if you'll excuse me saying so."

"A fanatic! His head had been turned by the priests. Bleeding hearts and crucifixes!"

"That sounds suspiciously like bigotry to me, sir," intervened Maitland, sweetening his impertinence with a dimpled smile.

"Bigotry be damned!" roared Edward in a voice that made the windows rattle. "What's your name, you ill-mannered pup?"

"Maitland, sir."

Tight-lipped in an effort to prevent themselves smiling, the undergraduates exchanged covert glances. With a trembling hand Edward reached out for a glass of water and gulped it noisily. Nobody said a word or looked in his direction. Presently he dropped his eyes and seemed surprised to find a plate of roast beef in front of him. Slowly he began to chew it. The meal proceeded in silence except for the chink of plates and cutlery. The blood had drained from Edward's cheeks. His rasping breath was clearly audible.

Little by little, however, casual conversation grew up over this violent outburst like a benevolent cloak of grass and weeds hiding some unsightly abandoned object. The weather was discussed. Miss Archer passed along a message from the far end of the table to inquire whether the young men had had good weather so far during their stay in Ireland. Yes, on the whole, reasonable enough, the answer came back. And soon the other ladies were passing their inquiries along, like so many lavender-scented handkerchieves for the poor undergraduates to wipe their bleeding lips on and return. And then, when this had taken some of the chill from the air and the line of communication had become clogged with too many questions and answers coming and going, they began to sing out their questions directly, person to person. Even some of the ladies at the other table (where the Major sat like a block of salt in front of his untouched plate) were unable to resist carolling a question or two across the intervening space—balm to the wounds of the nicely-spoken young men who had just suffered Edward's boorish outburst. In no time the cacophony had rendered even this method of communication uncertain. "It sounds like the parrot-house at the zoo," mused the Major grimly. And he glanced at Edward, who was staring straight ahead, features still set in a mask of rage from behind which, for the moment, the fire had consumed itself.

Besides, it was quite plain that the ladies had got the whole thing wrong—that far from being wounded the undergraduates were absolutely delighted with Edward's outburst and were thinking: "What a perfectly splendid old Tory! What a rare find!" The whole thing was priceless: the old ladies, the revolvers (what a shame they weren't loaded!), the decrepit palace around them—and brooding in the middle of it, John Bull! Never-say-die in person! The evening would make a rare saga when retold over beer-mugs in the buttery next term. It might be entitled: "How Maitland Put His Cherubic Head In The British Lion's Mouth...And Got It Bitten Off!" Only Captain Roberts, who had lost his taste for battles of any description (even verbal), felt uncomfortable and heartily wished the meal were at an end.

Coffee, these days, was no longer served in a separate room but wheeled in tepid and acid to the tongue on a trolley by Murphy, who confected it himself out of heaven only knew what ingredients in some little alcove reserved for the purpose. The bright chatter of questions and answers had continued to ring undiminished throughout the dessert of apple fritters and Edward, brooding at the end of the table, was all but forgotten. But hardly had the first acid fumes of coffee from the approaching trolley reached the nostrils of the diners when he spoke again.

His words were lost in the hubbub to everyone except Danby, to whom they had been addressed. A chilled hush fell on the two long tables as Danby, smiling faintly, prepared to reply. At length, flicking aside the long lock of hair that drooped over one eye, he said: "That all depends, sir, from which side you look at it. From the point of view of the Volunteers the Easter Week rebellion must seem incredibly heroic and patriotic. As for being stabbed in the back, I'm afraid I don't quite see how you can justify that as a description of the situation."

"The British Army fought to defend Ireland against the Kaiser while the Catholics stayed at home safe and

sound. Justify that if you can! And then...and then...and then they attacked the very lads who were giving their lives to save them! If that isn't treachery, I'm damned if I know what is!" And Edward sat back quivering with righteous indignation.

"But you don't even know your facts, sir...You don't even know your facts!" cried Danby, raising his voice to the thrilling pitch that had so often brought him deserved applause from the Oxford Union. "I say again, you don't even know your facts...Do you realize that there were a hun-dred thousand, I repeat, a hundred thousand Catholic Irishmen fighting in the British Army? There was no question of treachery at all. The war against the Kaiser had nothing to do with the fight for Ireland's freedom."

"Pacifists! It's all very well for you lily-livered youngsters who were hiding at home behind your mother's skirts. Think of the men who were risking their lives in France and risking them for *you*! Major, you were risking your life in France... Perhaps you'd tell these young pacifists whether it was treachery or not!"

The Major sat dumbly at the end of his table. There was a long, an interminable silence. Even Murphy, carrying round the cups of coffee, froze in his tracks and arrested his laboured breathing. At length the Major heaved a sigh and said, softly but audibly: "You're perfectly right, Edward. I think we all felt we'd been stabbed in the back."

"There, you see," cried Edward triumphantly.

"What did I tell you? Treachery!"

But Danby, his eyes twinkling with the pleasure of doing battle with this redoubtable old juggernaut, appeared not in the least abashed. He smiled impishly at his friends and then said: "Really, sir, you can't classify us all as cowards quite as easily as that. My friend Captain Roberts here, for example, served most heroically in France and I believe he feels, as we all do, that the Easter Week affair was perfectly justified. How about it, Roberts?"

Once again there was a pause and a seemingly interminable silence while everyone held their breath. Captain Roberts blinked and licked his lips. His balding undergraduate head was a great mass of wavy wrinkles as he contemplated the toad which had been put on his plate. For a moment even Danby wondered whether he might not have been over-confident. But then at last Captain Roberts cleared his throat and murmured hoarsely: "Perfectly justified...We all thought so..."

He had opened his mouth wide. He had swallowed the toad. "Good old Roberts!" the undergraduates were thinking and, beside him, Bunny Burdock surreptitiously gave his arm an encouraging, comradely squeeze. But Captain Roberts was careful to avoid the Major's eye.

A thunderous crash cut short the undergraduates' jubilation. It came from Edward's heavy oak chair, which had flown back ten feet and overturned. He was on his feet, his face white and working with fury, glaring at Roberts. But then, without a word he turned and strode out of the room.

The Major, who had glimpsed the expression on his face, hurried after him, napkin in hand—but when he reached the door he thought better of it. He listened to the diminishing echo of Edward's heavy footsteps on the tiles of the corridor and then, folding his napkin, returned to his place.

It was at this moment that Maitland, who had taken a sip of Murphy's bitter brew, took the lid off the sugar-bowl in front of him. Instead of lumps of sugar it contained a pile of dully glistening metal lozenges...revolver bullets! Making a droll face he picked one up, dropped it into his coffee and began to stir it with the barrel of the revolver beside his plate.

This was altogether too much for the undergraduates. They had been close to bursting all evening. Now all they could do was throw back their heads and howl with laughter till their ribs ached.

This great gale of youthful laughter filled the dining-room and echoed away down dim, empty corridors, ringing faintly through all the familiar sitting-rooms, dusty, silent and forgotten; penetrating to the floors above with their disused bedrooms and dilapidated bathrooms and to the damp, sleeping cellars, quiet now for eternity, unvisited except by the rats. It was such healthy, good-natured laughter that even the old ladies found themselves smiling or chuckling gently. Only Captain Roberts at one table and the Major at the other showed no sign of amusement. They sat on in silence, chin in hand, perhaps, or rubbing their eyes wearily, waiting in patient dejection for the laughter to come to an end.

The body might well have been left in the potting-shed where it had first been carried, or dragged rather, and laid out on a pile of old potato sacks. But the shed was a damp and draughty place, smelling strongly of earth and rotting vegetation. Gardening implements hung from nails, some of them so rusty that they were now only skeletons of themselves: a spade with its broad face eaten away, a rake with its teeth flaked into threads as thin as needles, all thanks to some gardener who in happier times had been too idle or trusting to oil the metal. Not so long ago, perhaps only two or three years earlier, some lazy person had dumped a pile of grass under the work-bench, the mowing from one of the lawns. In the interim it had turned into a yellowish, putrid mass with a hard outer crust indented with the print of a boot.

Altogether the potting-shed had seemed to the Major too stark and comfortless a place to leave a young man's body, even for so short a time. So with the help of Seán Murphy he had carried it into the house and placed it on a side table in the gun room. Here at least one could be fairly sure that the sight of it would not disturb the ladies. All the same, once it had been laid out on the table and Seán Murphy had retired, his

friendly face still registering shock at this sudden contact with mortality, the Major found himself wondering whether it might not have been better to have left it where it was. The ragged clothes of a labourer, the muddy boots laced with string, the threadbare jacket and patched trousers—all this seemed out of keeping with the gracious oak panelling and the antlers on the walls, even when stretched horizontal with death on a side table. It was almost as startling, mused the Major, as finding a chimney-sweep lounging on the sofa in one's drawing-room. Now that it was here in the gun room the body seemed to have been more at ease in the potting-shed.

He stood back, head on one side and finger to his mouth. Well, it would be absurd to have it carried back to the potting-shed now. He would have done better to leave it as it was, perhaps, but there was no point in worrying about that. His eye fell on another incongruity: above the body on a shelf there were a great many tarnished silver cups, for Edward had been a marksman in his day. Still was, apparently, in spite of his shaking hands. But the less one thought about that the better.

Shaking his head wearily he looked round for something to throw over the dead man. But there was nothing, so he left the room for a moment and returned with a clean tablecloth which he unfolded and threw over the body, taking another look as he did so at the young man's white face and bright red hair, at the bluish eyelids which he had closed himself. The mouth was hanging open, however, and this gave the face an imbecile appearance. Turning, the Major's eye at this moment encountered the resentful, open-mouthed pike in the glass case over the mantelpiece and he thought: "That won't do at all. I must close the poor lad's mouth before it gets too stiff."

Touching the face gave him an unpleasant shock. The skin was still soft and pliable to his fingertips. It so obviously *belonged to someone*! He shuddered as he gently squeezed the chin until the lips closed.

But when he took his hand away the mouth fell open once more. He tried again and the same thing happened. The position of the head was wrong, that was the trouble. On the shelf below the silver cups he found a copy of *Wisden's Almanac* for 1911 which he judged to have the right thickness. He blew the dust from it and slipped it under the boy's head. This time the mouth stayed closed. Taking a deep breath, the Major went to sit down in one of the armchairs by the empty grate.

He sat for five minutes without moving a muscle. Then there was a knock on the door and Edward came in, somewhat apologetically.

"Ah, there you are, Brendan. I was wondering where you'd got to."

He looked round the room and gave a slight start when his eye fell on the bulging tablecloth. But he made no comment as he came to sit down opposite the Major. Nor did the Major speak.

Presently Edward, with his head tilted back and mouth open in a way that strangely resembled the corpse's attitude of a few minutes earlier, said: "My nose has been bleeding... divil of a time trying to get it to stop. They say you should put a cold key down the back of your shirt, don't they, Brendan? Or is that collywobbles, I can never remember ?"

The Major made no reply. Edward sighed faintly and his uptilted gaze wandered around the panelled walls at the various antlers, at the winter forest of stags, at the ibex and antelope and zebra watching the men with calmly accusing glass eyes. For an instant the dreadful thought occurred to the Major that Edward had now gone completely insane and was looking for a place on the wall to mount the Sinn Feiner. But no, Edward had tugged a bloodstained handkerchief from his pocket and was patting his nostrils gingerly. His face had assumed a faintly martyred expression.

"What you don't realize, Brendan, is that we're at war...If people come and blow things up they must take the consequences! They must be taught a lesson!"

"Oh, Edward, these are our own people! They aren't the Germans or the Bolshevists...This is their country as much as it is ours...*more* than it is ours! Blowing up statues is nothing!"

Edward's face darkened and he said bitterly: "I always knew you were on their side, Brendan. I'm only thankful that poor Angie didn't live to see it. A man of your background, I'd have thought you'd have been more loyal."

"Oh for God's sake shut up, Edward."

"I caught them at it red-handed. I don't shoot innocent people from behind hedges. It was perfectly fair."

"For days you've been waiting for them to come!" Edward grunted but made no attempt to deny it. In any case it was now clear to the Major why he had been spending so much time up on the roof. For days Edward had been using the statue of Queen Victoria the way a big-game hunter uses a salt-lick in the jungle, knowing that sooner or later it would become too much for them to resist. And what was the difference, he wondered, between shooting someone from behind a hedge and shooting them from a roof?

"It was perfectly fair!" Edward repeated, cracking his knuckles.

True, the Major was thinking. Edward probably did not see Sinn Feiners as people at all. He saw them as a species of game that one could only shoot according to a very brief and complicated season (that is to say, when one caught them in the act of setting off bombs).

"It was perfectly fair!" Edward said for the third time and the Major thought: "No, it wasn't that at all. It was an act of revenge. Revenge for his piglets. Revenge for Angela. Revenge for a meaningless life. Revenge for the accelerating collapse of Unionism. Revenge for the destruction of the sort of life he'd been brought up to. Revenge for the loss of Ireland." He didn't see Sinn Feiners as human beings at all. And after all, would the

Sinn Feiners be any more likely to see Edward as a human being and take pity on him?

Edward was frightened, the Major realized abruptly. The man was terrified! That bullet-proof waistcoat had not been an idle whim, it had been a desperate measure to shore up his crumbling nerve. Suddenly this was so clear to the Major that he wondered why he had not realized it before.

"You'd better go upstairs and go to bed," the Major said, not unsympathetically. "You're exhausted. I'll see to the doctor and the D.I. when they get here."

But when Edward had left him alone with the presence bulging under the tablecloth all the horror returned. He saw Edward triumphantly dragging the dead Sinn Feiner across the gravel. He closed his eyes...Edward comes nearer and nearer, one of the dead man's ankles gripped under each armpit like the shafts of a hand-cart. Behind him the heavily muscled shoulders and lolling head leave a long trail on the dew-laden gravel and the friction causes the arms to spread out wide into the attitude of crucifixion. Released from somewhere inside the house, the Afghan hound comes bounding up and whisks cheerfully around the body which Edward is dragging towards the potting-shed.

"Thank heaven I sent the twins away. Edward will go too now. Today or tomorrow. As soon as possible."

The Major underwent a craving to light his pipe, but respect for the dead young man across the room prevented him. Thwarted, the craving for tobacco transformed itself into a craving for something else that was normal—anything: to go fishing, to watch a cricket match, to take tea with his aunt in Bayswater. He couldn't, of course. Everything had to be settled in Kilnalough. Besides, his aunt was dead also—for a moment he found himself thinking of her with great sadness and love. But then the bulging tablecloth restored him to that morning's tragedy.

He looked at his watch and was astonished to see that it was not yet eight o'clock, scarcely breakfast-time. Had his watch stopped? No. Which meant that little over an hour had elapsed since he had been woken by the explosion which had preceded the firing of a single shot.

At first, examining the body in the potting-shed, he had been unable to find any trace of a wound and had wildly hoped that he had been deceived, that there had been no shot from the roof, that the lad had been killed in some other way—by the blast from the explosion, perhaps. But then, looking more carefully at the lolling head he had seen the widened, blood-rimmed hole in the ear, which the bullet had exactly entered. Suddenly the head moved. Balanced on folded potato sacks, it had rolled a little to one side. Now, from that neatly circular but too large hole in the young man's ear, liquid began to well up—slow and thick, like dark oil from the neck of a bottle. The Major had watched it drip from the ear to the work-bench and from the work-bench to the putrid mown grass. Presently, however, it diminished and stopped.

"Who is it?"

A maid was standing timidly at the gun room door saying that the doctor and the man from the police...But they had already edged past her and entered the room, the doctor struggling forward with his frail, white head on a level with his shoulders. It was intolerable, thought the Major, that an old man should be got out of bed at such an hour of the morning. His shoelaces were undone and a sparse frost of white beard showed on his cheeks. As he came forward he glanced once, briefly, at the Major with eyes that were alert and curiously full of sympathy, as if this body under the tablecloth were in some way related to the Major instead of a complete stranger.

"When you've finished here I shall go back with you into Kilnalough. I must speak to the boy's father..."

"That would be absurd, Major."

The Major passed a hand over his brow, which was damp with perspiration. "Of course he must have been told by now. There's nothing I can say to console him, I realize that. All the same I must speak to him. He must be told that Edward acted only for himself. What he did was inhuman and intolerable...I tried to get him to leave with the twins but he refused, yet perhaps I didn't try hard enough to persuade him. I should have realized what he was up to, but I never thought...For the past few weeks he has been full of hatred and despair. I tried to get him to leave...He's a little mad, I'm sure. Why should I be responsible for everything he does? The man is no concern of mine. This morning he accused me of being disloyal! It's intolerable...and yet what can I do? People must be told that Edward is no longer able to control himself. I'll see that he goes away, of course, whether he wants to or not. Clearly he can't stay here. The boy's father mustn't be allowed to think of his son as a martyr of the British, that would be unjust. What hope is there for Ireland if people are allowed to behave in this way? That poor boy was the victim of a private hatred and despair...I'm sure you understand me, Doctor. If you don't understand me, nobody will!"

The old man sighed and shook his head, raising a feeble hand to pat the Major's arm. But he had nothing to say.

Later, while waiting for the doctor, the Major stood beside the shattered statue of Queen Victoria and talked with the D.I., whose name was Murdoch, a curiously dry, pedantic man with a crooked smile which lit up one side of his face in wrinkles, leaving the other perfectly smooth. He had reacted to the death of the Sinn Feiner with equanimity, if not indifference. At most he had betrayed a mild, as it were, official satisfaction that a criminal had received punishment. The Major conceived a dislike for him and turned his attention to the statue.

It had been damaged but not completely destroyed. Although a gaping hole had appeared in the horse's flanks, the august cavalier had managed to remain in the saddle, leaning acutely sideways in the manner of a

bareback rider in a circus ring. The blast had immodestly lifted her steel skirts a few inches, he noticed.

"Gelignite and a coffee tin," explained Murdoch at his elbow. "A temperamental explosive which kills the Shinners and British with perfect impartiality. In Irish they call the stuff '*Bas gan Sagart*'—'Death without the priest.'" And while one half of Murdoch's face remained smooth and solemn, the other half lit up with wrinkled glee.

Later again the Major sat for a long time in the room of the priest, Father O'Byrne, sometimes talking, sometimes in silence. The room was very small, dark and cluttered with books. The Major was abominably tired. He frequently looked at his watch, but the hours of the morning refused to pass.

"Edward Spencer is a coward and a murderer, Major... You're a poor sort of man that you'd take it on yourself to make excuses for him."

The Major was abominably tired. Yet he was fascinated by the priest's threadbare cassock and by the hatred in his eyes. At length he lifted his eyes from the Major's face to the crucifix on the wall. To the Major the steadiness of this gaze on the crucifix seemed blind, inhuman, fanatical. The yellowish naked body, the straining ribs, the rolling eyes and parted lips, the languorously draped arms and long trailing fingers, the feet crossed to economize on nails, the cherry splash of blood from the side...

"That boy got what he deserved," he said harshly. "I only hope it may serve as an example to some of the other young cut-throats who are laying Ireland to waste!"

And with that he turned and strode out of the house, slamming the door with a crash.

In the weeks which had elapsed since the night of the ball the health of Mr Norton had declined steadily. It was hard to say whether this was because the poor man had over-exerted himself on the dance-floor or whether it was merely a natural and inevitable decline of the faculties. In any event, he was now confined to bed, his mind wandering indiscriminately between mathematics and the boudoir, sometimes chuckling to himself, sometimes in tears, but constantly demanding company and attention.

Their sense of duty overcoming their distaste, the ladies would sometimes take their knitting and climb the stairs to the first floor to sit with him. And while they knitted he would gabble long, incomprehensible equations interlarded with scarcely more intelligible descriptions of his encounters with that sex to which, all his life, he had devotedly attempted to unite himself (only to finish his days, old and alone, between these chilly, rumpled sheets). The Major was sorry for him but glad, on the whole, that his reminiscences were so difficult to fathom...The snatches that one *could* understand were extraordinarily indecent, even to the Major's hardened military ears.

One day, afraid lest Mr Norton's ramblings should offend the ladies (particularly those whose honour had remained unimpaired by marriage), the Major brought him an arithmetic textbook belonging to the twins which he had happened to come across in a waste-paper basket unemptied since the previous winter. Mr Norton seized it with delight and in the few days that remained to him (before his rela-tions whisked him away to a more suitable institution) recited mathematical problems without pausing for breath, answering each one promptly before proceeding to the next. The Major sometimes paused to listen to this litany, and one of the problems, in particular, remained in his mind. It concerned a man who was unable to swim and found himself in a leaking rowing-boat so many hundreds of yards from land. He was faced with the alternative of baling rapidly with a tin cup (volume so many cubic inches; maximum rate of baling movement so many times per minute), the water entering at such-and-such a speed; or of ignoring the leak and rowing furiously (at so many miles per hour) for the nearest land... or, of course, a combination of now one, now the other. How should this man best proceed?

"Can he make it?"

"Afraid not quite, old chap," replied Mr Norton with unexpected clarity.

"Ah," said the Major absently and wandered off puffing his pipe.

The Major was working hard these days, helped by Mrs Roche, Miss Archer and some of the other ladies. Edward's frame of mind had improved to some extent since he had killed a Sinn Feiner. An abscess had been lanced and a quantity of poison had been allowed to escape. Nevertheless the Major was aware that it would fill up again, given time.

Surprisingly docile at first, Edward had agreed to go to England and spend some time with the twins. He had even shown one or two faint traces of remorse. The Major had come upon him cleaning the congealed blood from the work bench in the potting-shed. On seeing the Major, however, he had stopped and walked out into the light drizzle, a hat-less and derelict figure. Latterly the Major had detected signs of renascent fear and bitterness. He was watching him more carefully now and it soon became clear that Edward was preparing plans for the defence of his estate. One evening when, in spite of the Major's absolute refusal to accommodate them, a frighteningly determined and aggressive young schoolmistress had succeeded in installing a brood of girl guides at the Majestic for the night, Edward, incoher-ent with whiskey and raddled with anger over the loss of Ireland, had discoursed to his tittering young guests and the gloomy, silent Major on fields of fire, enfilading machine-guns, flanking attacks and suchlike. It all boded ill. One must work quickly.

The explosion and the shooting had had at least one good effect: it had caused three of the less important ladies to leave immediately and had decided the others that they too must find a place to go. There was

considerable distress, of course, in the residents' lounge, much weeping and sniffing of salts. But the Major was doing what he could to counter this despondency. He had written to the Distressed Gentlefolk's Aid Association and was considering other possibilities. There must be girls' boarding schools in Egypt, India and other places (remote, certainly, but where the natives were better behaved than the Irish) whose dusky little pupils would benefit from the dignity and moral rectitude of an elderly English lady, even an impoverished one. The trouble was that the ladies greeted this suggestion with further despondency and alarm, convinced that the Major was planning to send them off alone to some tropical knacker's yard.

Amid all this distress Mrs Roche was a great help and comfort. She encouraged the ladies, made practical suggestions, helped them to compose appealing yet dignified letters to more fortunate relations. She even took Edward in hand, telling him briskly that he shouldn't drink so much (which nobody else had dared do) and sewing a button on his jacket. The Major at this time entertained a faint hope that Mrs Roche might at last discover a romantic interest in Edward—after all, he was still, with his massive, handsome face and commanding presence, an imposing figure in his own way. But Mrs Roche had more sense and presently she left with her mother, Mrs Bates, for some happier destination. She left the Major wondering whether Edward could be relied on to look after Mrs Rappaport, since no institution was ever likely to accept both her and the hideous marmalade cat, not to mention her revolver.

Miss Staveley, who, having the money, could have left, surprised everyone by remaining stalwartly where she was. Indeed, once Mrs Roche had left she took on her role of comforter and adviser, becoming, in her rather muddled way, a tower of strength. In general, after the first despondency had worn off morale was excellent. The ladies, in adversity, were determined to show "the stuff they were made of," which turned out to be a very tough weave indeed.

This was fortunate, because standards had yet again (and for the last time) begun to decline at the Majestic. By now most of the servants had vanished. From the day of the explosion they had gradually melted away, as native bearers on safaris are reputed to melt, one by one, into the jungle, taking with them anything of value that did not happen to be nailed down (not, however, that there was a great deal of value at the Majestic, nailed down or otherwise). Among the many objects whose disappearance for the most part went unnoticed the following items were seen to be missing: two of Edward's sporting rifles, his hunting pink, his velvet smoking-jacket, most of his fishing rods, a carved ivory chess-set from the residents' lounge, approximately half of the pile of stone hot-water jars on the first floor, a hundred weight of embossed cutlery and china (very popular), a portrait in oils of a former manager of the hotel clad in Napoleonic uniform, sheets, pillow-cases and blankets (also very popular), the unfortunate dog Foch (who had always been a great favourite with the kitchen staff) and the stuffed pike from the gun room.

One morning, returning up the drive from an early walk through the grounds, the Major was astonished to meet the cook, clad in a fur coat several sizes too big for her, with unlaced men's shoes on her feet, and pulling a hand-cart piled high with gilt chairs from the writing-room. At the sight of the Major she gave a shriek of fear and cried what sounded like: "Jesus, Mary and Joseph!" But the Major averted his eyes and walked past her without even noticing, thereby proving to the cook the efficacy of prayer.

The cook was the last of the servants to go. Presently only Murphy remained, muttering to himself and haunting the staircases as he had always done. These days, of course, he was never asked to do anything, for his reason was quite clearly unhinged. He was merely *there*, a cadaverous relic of a happier time. Occasionally someone might glance at him curiously and wonder why he did not leave too. But he didn't. He remained to lurk in the company of the silent, prowling cats in the shadowy upper storeys. People were too busy to bother about him.

There was the cooking to be done, for instance. Miss Johnston had taken charge of the kitchens and established a hierarchy of helpers whose jobs diminished gradually in importance from her own to that of poor Mrs Rice who was considered only capable of washing the dishes. Strangely enough, the food was better in these last few days of the Majestic's existence than it had been for many years—indeed, since the hotel had reached its zenith in the 1880s.

The ladies tied aprons round their waists and put their diamond rings in a saucer on the sideboard while they kneaded the dough for apple pies or disembowelled chickens with trembling fingers. How exciting it was! If only the future had seemed less uncertain how they would have enjoyed this challenge to abilities which since girlhood, throughout all their long, dull and genteel lives, had lain dormant! Moved, the Major watched them at work, Miss Bagley's rheumy eyes blurred by incipient cataracts, Miss Devere's head permanently bent to one side, Miss Johnston unable to stand up for long because her ankles would swell, Mrs Rice stooped over the sink with the steam clouding her pince-nez, and all of them, without exception, forgetting things ("Now what was it I was going to do?") and losing things ("Now where on earth did I put...?") which very often turned out to be in front of their noses.

But then with a start, the Major would remember that he had letters to write, that he must telephone Dublin, that he must put an advertisement in the *Irish Times*...and many other things. In short, that he must continue to row furiously for the nearest land, for the boat continued to settle lower and lower in the water.

Unsavoury characters were noticed lurking among the trees (the Major remembered with nostalgia the "unsavoury character" they had hunted chuckling through the park on the afternoon he had first arrived). Worse, the ceiling of the writing-room descended with an appalling crash, ridden to the floor by the grand

piano from the sitting-room above. For hours afterwards a thick white fog of plaster hung in the corridors, through which the inhabitants of the Majestic flitted like ghosts, gasping feebly.

* * *

PREMIER'S BID FOR PEACE
Proposed Conference in London Following
The King's Appeal for Reconciliation
De Valera Invited by Lloyd George to London

Reuter's Paris Correspondent telegraphed yesterday: "Commenting this morning on the letter addressed to Mr De Valera inviting him to attend a conference in London with Sir James Craig to explore to the utmost the possibility of a settlement of the Irish question, *Le Petit Parisien* lays special stress on the conciliatory and even friendly tone of the letter, which, in its opinion, marks a great and praiseworthy effort on the part of the British Government."

* * *

Every now and then, just for a moment, the Major would rest on his oars, lost in thought. It was early summer, a delightful season. The smell of grass and wood lingered delightfully under the mild sky. On his way to fix a FOR SALE notice to one of the gateposts he strolled through a grove of silver birches; it was hard to believe that there was any malice in Ireland. For a moment he felt almost at peace; but then it occurred to him that a few inches below where he was standing the rotting carcase of Rover sat up and begged, encased in earth.

A letter arrived from Faith with the news that Charity had fallen in love with Mimi's butler, Brown. But this was swiftly followed by a letter from Charity saying that it wasn't true. Besides, Brown was a Socialist and had ideas above his station and would the Major send her some money (it was hopeless asking Daddy) as she desperately needed some new clothes? She and Faithy were ashamed to be seen out of doors in their dreadful Irish rags and tweeds and all the men they met absolutely had fits when they saw what scarecrows they were. Also could the Major afford to buy them a motor car? In London a motor car was ABSOLUTELY NECESSARY! Just a small one would do as they didn't need anything big and it would only cost more. Mimi (Aunt Mildred) had crashed hers into a wall and the bally thing wouldn't work any more. A frightful bore! But the clothes were the most important because they simply couldn't wait and would he write back immediately sending a cheque.

The Major did write back immediately, sending a cheque for fifty pounds together with the news that Edward would be setting out for London in two days' time. He himself would follow when he had made final arrangements with an estate agent in Dublin. By now it was the end of June and almost everything had been settled. The dogs had been sent to a kennel while preparations were made for their new home. The ladies' trunks had been packed and delivered to the station, labelled for various destinations (those of Miss Bagley, Miss Porteous, Miss Archer, Mrs Rice and Miss Staveley all bore the address of a boarding-house on the Isle of Wight purchased expressly by Miss Staveley to give shelter to her friends, a most satisfactory conclusion). Old Mrs Rappaport had been dispatched to London, still armed to the teeth and the wonder of her fellow-passengers, carrying the marmalade cat in a wicker basket. She was accompanied on her journey by an indigent cousin of Edward's, specially hired for the purpose.

In the course of Edward's last afternoon at the Majestic he and the Major took sledge-hammers and rained blows on Queen Victoria and her horse in an attempt to restore her to a more vertical position. For half an hour they hammered away at her shoulders, her head, even her bosom, the sound of their blows ringing cheerfully over the countryside. As they worked, her delicate green metal became pocked with brown marks... but little else was achieved. She was still leaning drunkenly sideways. At most they had managed to correct her position a few inches by the time they retired, perspiring, to drink some tea (in plentiful supply now that the old ladies commanded the kitchen). After tea they returned to hammer down her ruffled skirts. That was all they could do for her.

"I shan't be leaving tomorrow, Edward. There are still a number of things I have to do here." The Major had delayed informing Edward of his decision to stay for fear that Edward too might change his mind. This fear had been illusory, he decided, seeing the stricken, anxious expression that appeared on Edward's face.

"But you *must* leave! It's dangerous here." Calmly, but feeling that he hated Edward, the Major said: "I don't intend just to walk off and leave the place to the bloody Shinners."

"But Brendan, you must face reality. You've read the newspapers. You know as well as I do that it's all over here. It's finished. Any day now that blighter Lloyd George is going to throw in the sponge and then there'll be hell to pay for people like you and me who've been loyal."

"I'm damned if I'm going to take to my heels, Edward, just because there's a possibility of trouble. If I go at all I shall go in my own good time."

"But good God, Brendan! Things are bad enough already. When they send the army home it'll be the law of

the jungle. Every Unionist in the South will have his throat cut. Go to Ulster if you want to stay in Ireland."

"I've made up my mind that I'm staying, Edward. At least for a while."

"But you can't stay *here*. The old place is falling to pieces. It's dangerous. You've been telling me for months how dangerous it is...Think of the writing-room ceiling! That could happen anywhere at all in the building, anywhere."

"I'll stay in the rooms that have the fewest cracks in them," said the Major smiling.

"Without servants?"

"Oh well, there's always Murphy."

"*Murphy*! Besides, just look at the size of the place, it's absurd. You can't live here all by yourself. And you just told me the place is up for sale."

"I'll wait until it's sold, then. But I refuse to be hounded out of the place by a handful of labourers with guns in their hands."

"Well, I shall stay with you, of course," Edward murmured unhappily. "But I must say I think it's most unwise."

"There's absolutely no question of you staying, Edward. You have the twins to think of."

Edward had dropped his sledge-hammer and was sitting on the stone steps facing the shattered statue, watching the jagged, freshly torn edges of metal glimmer in the sunshine. A faint breeze stirred the shaggy mass of grey hair above Edward's grim, defeated face. "Absurd," thought the Major, "that we should go on competing when the thing that we were competing for has long since vanished."

"I agree that it's maybe not wise," the Major said gently. "But my mind is made up. Besides, I'm getting to be too old a dog to learn new tricks. Now let's forget about it and talk about something more pleasant on our last afternoon."

Edward was looking relieved. His eyes wandered away from the statue and came to rest some distance away on the bed of lavender planted by his wife "before she died." What was he thinking about? wondered the Major. Of his dead wife, perhaps...of his eldest daughter, the dead one whom he had loved the most and even now continued to love more than he could ever love Ripon or the twins.

And presently, as if the Major had been able to divine his thoughts, Edward said: "I remember the day we brought Angie home in the snow. She was only a baby. It hardly seems any time at all."

The telephone was ringing in Edward's study. So still was the afternoon and so silent the house that the Major heard it ringing from outside in the park. District Inspector Murdoch was calling from Valebridge.

"Is anything wrong? Did they get on the train all right?"

Well, that was what he was calling about. The train hadn't yet left Valebridge because of some trouble on the line between there and Dublin. It wasn't yet clear what was wrong but it might mean a considerable delay.

"They're all elderly. They mustn't be put under any strain. If there's no chance of them reaching Dublin before night-fall you'd better send them back here and we'll try again tomorrow."

"Very well, Major." There was a pause. "By the way, I'm sending one of my men over to have a look round the Majestic."

"Why?" asked the Major. But Murdoch had hung up the receiver.

"How dead everything is!" thought the Major as he wandered aimlessly through the empty rooms and corridors. Utter silence. He could no longer even hear that strange underwater cracking sound. Strange to think that Edward and a few old ladies could make such a difference to the place.

The parting had been a painful one. Convinced that they would not live to see their dear friend the Major again on this earth, the ladies had allowed themselves to surrender to their emotions. He had been obliged to kiss one faded tear-stained cheek after another, clasped to one frail lavender-scented bosom after another—all this combined with the alarms and distractions usually attendant on old ladies travelling: forgotten purses, mislaid tickets, letters for the Major to post, tips that they had forgotten to administer (but who was there left to tip at the Majestic, unless the Major himself?), addresses and timetables that had to be remembered and consequently were swiftly forgotten, little parcels (containing handkerchiefs on which his name and rank had been elaborately embroidered) for him to open after they had gone, urgent visits to the lavatory that had to be made at the last minute when everyone was ready to leave. The Major endured all this with good humour and insisted on remaining cheerful, chaffing the ladies briskly lest they should incapacitate themselves completely with sobs and be obliged to lie down, missing the train.

But at last the ladies motoring to Dublin in the Daimler with Edward had moved away, followed by the hired char-à-banc taking the rest to the railway station at Valebridge. The Major had found himself standing alone in the drive. Of the ladies nothing remained except a faint odour of smelling-salts on the still air.

Not yet accustomed to the strangely silent and deserted house, he had decided to continue his interrupted stroll through the grounds. On his way he began to come across traces of Edward's activities that he had been too preoccupied to notice before; a small cache of ammunition wrapped in an oilskin package was the first thing he happened to see. All the time that he had been working frantically to close down the Majestic Edward had been outside in the park planning its defence. Now that he was looking for them he began to find oilskin packages of ammunition everywhere. But that was not all. There were foxholes too dug in the potato

field and in the meadow beyond, and first-aid boxes lodged in hollow trees in the woods. Every rise in the ground had some cover, in some places metal shields cut from segments of old boilers and equipped with slits to fire from—all facing outwards towards the boundaries of the estate as if, just out of sight over the rise of the next hill, silent armies had been massed, waiting to attack a slightly mad old English gentleman who drank too much whiskey and raved about the loss of Ireland. Poor Edward! No wonder he had discoursed with such energy to the tittering girl guides at the dinner-table about fields of fire, flanking attacks and strategic emplacements! Sitting on the steps the other day for a moment, he must have had a vision of being left alone with the Major to man all these positions against the vast and ruthless armies of the Pope.

Standing at the highest point of the meadow, the Major scanned the bright, peaceful countryside looking for the menace. He thought of a competition he had seen in one of the newspapers. There was a photograph of some footballers frozen at a dramatic moment in the game, but with the image of the football itself removed from the picture. Readers were asked to make a cross on the photograph where they thought the ball must be. Somewhere before his eyes in the sleeping countryside there was a threat to his safety. He knew it was there somewhere. But to him it was invisible.

As he was walking back to the house he paused at the edge of the drive to wait for a young man on a bicycle who had just emerged from the trees and was pedalling towards him. He had a rifle slung across his back and was wearing a curious mixture of uniforms: his pedalling legs were clad in darkgreen R.I.C. trousers; the upper part of his body, however, was clothed in khaki service uniform, while on his head was perched a flat civilian cap bearing the crowned-harp badge of the R.I.C. A long white hen's feather was stuck into this cap behind the badge. "A fine expression of the muddled will of the great British people!"

This strangely clad individual had now halted his bicycle by dragging his boots along the ground and, not without suspicion, had spoken out in tones of pure Cockney, wanting to know if the Major was the Major.

"Yes I am. What can I do for you?"

He had been told to have a look round the Majestic in case there was trouble. The whole countryside knew that the people living in the Majestic had moved away and there might be hooligans coming to loot the place. He patted the butt of his rifle, but without confidence, more as if he were superstitiously touching wood.

"By all means have a look round the out-houses. But be careful; a lot of the timber is rotten and you could easily break your neck. Another thing...if you happen to see a mad old man with a wrinkled face, don't shoot him. He's one of the servants. When you've finished come inside and ring the bell on the reception desk. I'll give you a cup of tea."

For an hour the Major tried to read an out-of-date copy of *Punch* in the gun room, but the silence made him uneasy and he found it hard to concentrate. Once more the telephone rang in Edward's study down the corridor, but it stopped before he had time to reach it. He waited for it to ring again, but it didn't, so he made his way down to the kitchens in order to brew some tea for himself and the young Black and Tan. On his way he smiled: he had caught himself glancing nervously into the open doorways he was passing. "Really, I've become an old lady myself, I've spent so much time with them. When all this is over I really must find myself some younger members of the sex!"

By five o'clock the teapot had grown cold and there was still no sign of the Black and Tan, so the Major went out to look for him. First he wandered through the kitchen garden towards the stables—but they were empty, as were the garages and out-houses. The door of the barn was open, so he peered in. A pleasant scent of summer hay greeted his nostrils. There was no sign of the young man. With misgiving he approached the ladder up to the loft and set his foot on the worm-eaten bottom rung. It took his weight, so he began to climb. When his head and shoulders had emerged through the trap-door he looked around. It was lighter up here. One of the wooden leaves of the loading-gate was open, allowing a shaft of sunlight to fall on the floor.

Someone had been here recently. Dust hung in the air and, where the sun touched it, blazed like a furnace. On each side the towering banks of hay had a grey look, as if cut many years ago and abandoned. But there was no one here now. He cautiously backed down the ladder. "I could look for him here for ever and not find him."

He continued, however, to move through a succession of courtyards, past the well and the pump, towards the apple house, of which the door also stood open. It was here that the superfluity of the Majestic's huge apple crop was stored: windfalls and "cookers" for the most part. At the time of the Major's first visit they had been piled on top of each other, bruised and rotting, to within a few feet of the roof; but in the interim the cook had made her daily visit to fill a coal-scuttle with apples for pies and desserts (and perhaps the old crones in black had also been filling their flour sacks). The result was that a hollow had been scooped out of this ocean of apples, a valley that built up from knee height to shadowy slopes reaching well above the Major's head. There was silence here too, and a pungent smell of rotting fruit. "In a few weeks," the Major was thinking, "this place will be so full of wasps that one won't be able to get near it...But then, in a few weeks will it matter any longer?" And he took a few steps forward into the gloom. As he did so there was a convulsion of the shadows behind him and he pitched forward into the apples. Losing consciousness, he was aware that the apples had begun to roll; a great avalanche of apples thundered down on him and buried him in blackness. But he was not dead yet, so he had to be dragged out by the heels.

The Major was left lying on the ground for a few moments while his wrists were tied behind his back. When he was picked up again a pool of blood was left in the place where he had lain. All the way down the steps from one terrace to the next, past the black and silent swimming-pool with its skeletal diving-board, past the derelict tennis courts and the empty weather-beaten urns that lined the route like grim sentinels, blood continued to splash every few paces. Presently the lowest terrace was reached. Then the Major's limp body was conveyed lower still, on to the rocks, and from there with considerable difficulty was handed down to the beach.

Some distance away was the young Black and Tan whom the Major had been attempting to summon for tea. Bound, gagged and, like the Major, scarcely conscious, he had been buried up to his neck in the sand, ready for the incoming tide. His head was lolling to one side and he did not raise it as the sound of clinking pebbles drew nearer and came to a halt beside him. His eyes were closed, his young face had a peaceful expression, and his breathing was slow and steady.

Beside the Black and Tan a hole was begun for the Major; but before it was more than two feet deep the digging spade rang against rock and this hole had to be abandoned. The spit of sand was narrow, the shape of a blade pointing towards the sea. Since the Black and Tan already occupied the only suitable position another hole was dug a few yards farther back. This time there was no impediment.

When the new hole was deep enough the Major's limp body was lowered into it and the crook of a walking-stick was used to drag his bound ankles back into a kneeling position. A heavy rock was then laid on the back of his calves, packed down with smaller stones and covered with sand. By this time only his head remained visible.

His wound had stopped bleeding now but he was still unconscious. Gradually, as darkness fell, the tide crept up the beach towards him. It was a mild, windless evening and the sea was calm. As it grew darker lonely, heart-rending shrieks were heard from some distance away—but it was only the peacocks, whom nobody had remembered to feed that day, preparing to roost for the night in the branches of an oak on the highest terrace.

Meanwhile the flooding tide continued its advance. Soon after the moon rose there was a snorting, gasping sound from further down the beach but presently silence and peace closed in once more.

When the whispering fringe of surf was still a few feet short of the Major's head, however, the tide reached its height and in due course began to ebb once more. By this time he was semi-conscious. Questions, impossible to seize and examine, loomed in the shadows. What was he doing buried in the sand? Had he been left to drown? And his mind wandered away, buoyant and aimless as a drifting balloon, to the trenches—to some "show" or other in some godforsaken wood without a name.

At first light people came to dig him up and he became feebly conscious once more. They dug with care, as if aware of the danger of slashing his bound wrists with the spade. They used their hands to feel out the edges of the heavy rock that lay on his calves and gently lifted it away. Then, in turn, they lifted out the Major and laid him on the sand.

By now he was completely numb. He could feel nothing. But the involuntary movement of his limbs had awoken a terrible cramp, so that it seemed as if his body was doing its best to tear itself to pieces. Each muscle in his stomach, thighs and shoulders had contracted as hard as marble, vying with its opposite number to snap his bones and ligaments. Yet at the same time his mind was quite peaceful. It was as if, after all, this body did not belong to him. As he lay there quietly on the sand, a great feeling of serenity stole over him—the sort of feeling one might have for a few moments after a serious accident when one realizes that one is no longer one's own responsibility. Other people were taking care of him. He could hear their voices faintly from farther down the beach where they were probing the sand with the spade. Presently they began to dig another hole.

The Major was now thinking about Sarah...and about love. And then, without being aware of any transition, he was thinking about Ovid, an author he had read without pleasure at school. Strange to think that some people should actually enjoy reading Ovid as much as, say, that story of T.C. Bridges which had been serialized in the *Weekly Irish Times* last year. What a charming story! There was one episode which had particularly taken his fancy: the young man confessing to his girl-friend that although in appearance a gentleman he is really a burglar, and that consequently it is inevitable that she must detest him...But the girl (and what a splendid surprise this had been both to the young man of the story and to the Major)...the girl sticks by him, stoutly says she loves him and doesn't believe him capable of stealing. (And true enough, there had been something rather rum about his theft. He had had a bump on the head or he'd been hypnotized and couldn't actually remember doing it.) Jolly decent of the girl, in any case, to stick by him. Sarah, of course, would undoubtedly do the same in that situation. And with this agreeable thought the Major's weary, salt-caked eyelids crawled down over his eyes and he slept, or became unconscious, it would have been difficult to say which.

When he next woke up he was again buried up to his neck in sand. The sun had risen and was blazing directly into his eyes, dancing on the surf not far away. This light blinded him, so that for some time he was aware of nothing but the pain of his retina. When he had become more accustomed to it, however, he realized that he was no longer alone. Scarcely more than a yard to the left there was another head poking out of the sand on the same level as his own. He recognized the fellow immediately: it was the young Cockney who had

come up to him on a bicycle the day before...He had invited the chap to tea.

"Why didn't you come to tea?"

But the man made no reply, merely continued to stare round at the Major in an insolent fashion with one cloudy blue eye opened very wide and the other one closed to a glinting slit. From his open mouth a wisp of something dark was trailing: it might have been seaweed. Presently a bluebottle came buzzing round and at last decided to settle on that wide blue eye. But the eye did not blink.

As the sun rose higher the Major's awareness improved and once again he did his best to rally the thoughts that sped here and there like small slippery fish, impossible to grasp. "Death!" he thought. And: "To drown." But this seemed inadequate, so he made a further effort and achieved: "To drown is awful..."; but this, although also inadequate, exhausted him for a while. Soon, however, he was able to scale another flight of steps up to consciousness and said to himself: "My side is deuced painful. Hurts like the devil." Then thoughts of Sarah, Edward and the twins occupied his mind, but they were no help to him. He must think of something else.

The movements of his limbs had in the meantime worked a gap of three or four inches between his body and the sand which moulded it. This gap had filled with water oozing up through the sand. He now noticed that the water had a reddish tinge and knew that he must be bleeding. At the same time as his consciousness improved he was tortured by thirst, and the aching of his limbs became intolerable. Neverthe-less he decided that, however painful it might be, he must move his head to see who else was on the beach beside himself and the insolent young Cockney. Millimetre by millimetre, a fraction of a degree at a time, he twisted his neck and moved his sluggish eyeballs, first in one direction, then in the other. On the beach there was not a soul to be seen. It was completely deserted.

The water took on a deeper shade of red. "Soon Sarah will come and dig me out," he thought with a mixture of love and agony as the swimming sunlight crept nearer and nearer. Then, once more, he lost consciousness.

Another three-quarters of an hour elapsed before some rescuers arrived to assist the buried Major. These rescuers were led, not by Sarah, but by Miss Johnston and Miss Staveley. Miss Bagley, though terrified and out of breath, was not very far behind. Bringing up the rear was poor Mrs Rice, who could not see very well and who had been given the spade to carry. Puffing and exhausted, she kept calling out to the others to wait for her, she was afraid she might fall and break her hip and then...heaven only knew what! Pneumonia, perhaps. When one gets on in years one must be careful.

In due course they set to work. Miss Staveley, who had seized the spade while Mrs Rice had a little rest, began to dig (and not a minute too soon). But she too was very tired (none of them had slept a wink, having returned from Valebridge to find the Major gone) and tiredness made her clumsier than ever, so that she seemed to be shovelling as much sand back into the hole round the Major as she was taking out of it. When at last the water was beginning to surge round her ankles, Miss Johnston, who had taken charge of the operation and was becoming apoplectic with impatience, seized the spade in her turn and, pneumonia or no pneumonia, began to dig with frenzy. But in the end it was only Miss Bagley (feebly assisted by Mrs Rice)—Miss Bagley whom the Major had never really liked as much as the others—who could muster the strength to lift out the heavy rock which pinned him in his watery grave. The young Cockney, however, was left for a second immersion.

From a window on the fourth floor of the Majestic a shadowy figure paused to watch the old ladies drag the Major's inert body back from the advancing sea.

"Dead!" Murphy's wrinkled old face convulsed with glee as he wandered on, crooning a song he had learned some fifty years earlier as a young man in Wicklow Town. "Ní shéanfad do ghrá-sa ná do pháirt 'n fhaida mhairfe mé..."

And as he shuffled from one silent, deserted room to another he watered the carpets with the liquid from the watering-can he was carrying; he sprinkled everything with it, the flowers on the curtains and the coronets on the faded red carpet in the corridor. He soaked the bedding with it and poured it into empty drawers and cupboards, crooning gently all the time. When he came upon a pair of long-abandoned ladies' shoes in a dusty drawing-room, chuckling, he filled them till they were brimming. Several times he padded slowly down the creaking stairs to fill his watering-can from the tank in the garage. Then the sound of his wheezing breath would alert the cats to the fact that their friend Murphy was back amongst them once more and they would all come galloping up, postponing whatever they had been doing—their bloody territorial battles in the attics or their fierce and appalling carnal endeavours on the battlements.

"Pussies!" Murphy would mutter. "Have a sup now, will ye?"

And he would sprinkle the seething quadrupeds until their fur became slick and oily (and the cats inside the fur became definitely displeased). Lick themselves though they might, there was nothing that would make their fur return to normal; howling with grief they slunk away, sticky and wretched.

"Dead!" said Murphy, standing in a patch of afternoon sunlight. "Sure I'll drink to that..." And gripping the watering-can, he raised it to his blue lips and began to gulp, pausing every now and then to make a smacking sound, it tasted so good.

"Now then, where're me matches?"

Wearily he turned out his pockets. On to the floor he dropped, one after another, a penknife, a raw potato with a bite out of it, two silver teaspoons, a devotional communication from the Society of the Daughters of the Heart of Mary, a ball of twine, a lump of tobacco, and a dead thrush. But no matches! Murphy scowled and popped the tobacco into his mouth, chewing morosely until he remembered how he used to make fire without matches as a boy. Once more he descended the creaking stairs, this time to Edward's study where he had seen a magnifying glass. Then up to the sunlight on the fourth floor where he trained the blazing golden eye on a piece of paper. Just as it was beginning to smoke, however, the sun passed behind a cloud. Murphy took another drink and sat down to wait impatiently for it to reappear.

The Major was not yet dead, however, though by now not very far from it. He was about a mile and a half from the Majestic, lying on Dr Ryan's kitchen table. The old ladies would never have had the strength to transport him here by themselves. Fortunately they had come upon Seán Murphy who, although he had gone into hiding, had been unable to resist lurking in the vicinity of his familiar potato diggings. At first he had seemed too frightened of the I.R.A. to help, but a brief conversation had convinced him that he was even more terrified of Miss Johnston. So the limp Major had been trundled up to the house in a wheelbarrow and then put in the Standard. The journey had reopened his wound, however, and now as he lay on the table he was once more bleeding copiously.

While the ladies were trying to staunch the flow of blood with towels the doctor, who was tired and upset by this sudden invasion, wandered away to look for a needle with which to stitch the wound. "Ach, old women! What a fuss they make! Always making a fuss, always talking, gossiping, good for nothing except drinking tea and causing trouble." It annoyed him to think that he had once actively sought the company of these creatures. What a young fool he must have been! he was thinking as he rummaged through the instruments scattered on his desk (now what was it he was looking for?). A young man is better off minding his studies. The musty, faded smell of old women drifted up out of his imagination as he slumped wearily in his armchair beside the empty grate. Women! Ah, his wife had been different of course, yes, but that had been many years ago. Years before the rise of the new Ireland. The new Ireland would get rid of all these old women. They wouldn't be allowed. His wife had smelled of skin, like a young girl, not of lavender water and peppermints. Ah, she was different, he was thinking sleepily; "people are insubstantial. They never last. All this fuss, it's all fuss about nothing. We're here for a while and then we're gone. People are insubstantial. They never last at all." As his ancient wrinkled eyes gently closed, he said to him-self absently: "Now wait, there was something I was going to do..."

In the kitchen the Major's face was as grey as oatmeal and the blood was flowing faster than ever, so that the old ladies were beside themselves with desperation. The sight of the blood all over the place would have been enough to make anyone quail, let alone an old lady who was not used to that sort of thing. But they hung on grimly, determined that the Major should live, come what might. By now they were pale and trembling themselves. Mrs Rice had already fainted, revived, fainted again, and now she was drinking a cup of tea to give her strength and courage. Meanwhile, where was that dratted doctor?

In due course the doctor awoke, refreshed by his nap, and remembered that he had been looking for a needle and that he had to stitch that young fool the Major, who had got himself into a scrape. He had told the silly ass to go while the going was good! He had known that something would happen. Only young fools would get themselves into trouble for nothing. And really, he thought, more disgruntled than ever, it was all for nothing! What purpose did anything serve? It all ended in the graveyard. He ought to know. He'd been to enough funerals in his time. And he tottered peevishly back to the kitchen, muttering: "People are insubstantial. They never last, they never last..."

"Of course they don't!" snapped Miss Johnston. "If you treat them all like this!"

"Old women!" snorted the doctor petulantly, looking more senile than ever. But the hands with which he set to work were surprisingly deft and steady for such an old man.

Presently the Major, stitched, bandaged, and given some beef tea, had been tucked into bed and his body had at long last been allowed to start on the business of repairing itself. The four ladies had all locked themselves into one of the upstairs bedrooms for fear of being molested by that dreadful old man. The doctor, for similar reasons, had locked himself into his study, and soon everyone was fast asleep. By this time the sun had set and it had grown quite dark. But about an hour later, while down on the beach the young Cockney was being immersed for the third time, yet another sunset lit up the sky, for Murphy had at last realized that the cloud behind which the sun had disappeared was, in fact, a hill to the west. And so he had resorted to matches instead, having come upon a box in an old silk dressing-gown of Edward's.

By the time the inhabitants of Kilnalough had noticed the glow in the sky and motored, ridden or walked out to the hotel, the Majestic was an inferno. Streams of fire the size of oak trees blossomed out of the windows of the upper storeys. Caterpillars of flame wriggled their way down the worn and threadbare carpets and sucked at the banisters and panelling until all the public rooms were ablaze. The heat grew so intense that the spectators were driven back with flushed faces, first to the edge of the gravel, then farther and farther back over the grass, which the heat quickly shrivelled to raffia—until at last they were standing right back

among the trees, gazing with shaded eyes at the blinding magnificence of the burning Majestic. By now only the attics under the roof were recognizable, their windows still black and empty.

It was from these black windows that flaming, shrieking creatures suddenly began to leap—hundreds of them, seething out of the windows on to the gutters and leaping out into the darkness. Those not already ablaze exploded in mid-air or ignited like flares as they hurtled through the great heat towards the earth. Someone in the crowd remarked that it was like watching the fiery demons pouring out of the mouth and nose of a dying Protestant. But that was not all, for now a hideous, cadaverous figure was framed for an instant, poised on the roof, his clothes a cloak of fire, his hair ablaze: Satan himself! Then he vanished and was never seen again in Kilnalough. But he was thought to have swooped down to eat a meal of children in the infernal regions.

For a few minutes more the Majestic became brighter and brighter until, like a miniature sun, it was impossible to look at for more than a moment with the naked eye. Then with a shuddering roar it caved in upon itself and an immense ladder of sparks climbed into the sky.

And that was the end of the Majestic. It continued to burn and smoke, however, for two more days and nights. Nobody considered burying the charred and scorched demons that littered the surrounding land. Soon they began to smell atrocious.

In July Dr Ryan received a visit from Mrs O'Neill and her daughter Viola. He had been asleep on the couch in his study and was displeased at having been woken. For some time it was not clear whether the visit was a social one or whether his professional services were required. Assuming the former, since both mother and daughter looked to be in good health, he showed them into his front room, a damp and depressing place which rarely encouraged visitors to prolong their stay more than was absolutely necessary. Having done this, he sank into a chair and closed his eyes. Mrs O'Neill chatted away sociably about this and that, while Viola smiled prettily, showing her dimples, occasionally directing a meaning glance at her mother ("Is he asleep?").

At last, after a long silence which the doctor had found agreeable but which his guests had found disturbing, Mrs O'Neill said: "Viola would like you to recommend a diet for her, Doctor. She finds she's getting rather plump and needs to lose a bit of weight."

With an effort the doctor got to his feet and shuffled off down the corridor to his study followed by Mrs O'Neill and Viola, both of whom wrinkled their noses when they saw the state the place was in. But still, one had to make allowances. He was elderly, and the only doctor in Kilnalough.

When Viola had partially undressed, the doctor looked briefly at her breasts and at her stomach and then motioned her to get dressed again.

"Well, Doctor?"

"She doesn't need a diet."

"But she's getting fat, Doctor!"

There was another long silence. The old man stood there wool-gathering, eyes half closed. Mrs O'Neill and Viola exchanged a significant glance. "Impossible," Mrs O'Neill was thinking, "impossible for him to keep his mind on anything for more than two seconds!"

"A diet, Doctor," she reminded him. But the doctor merely sighed and it looked as if they were not ever going to get any sense out of him. At last, however, his trembling, wrinkled lips parted and he said: "Your daughter doesn't need a diet because she's pregnant, Mrs O'Neill."

"Pregnant! But that's impossible. Viola is only a child. She doesn't even *know* any young men, do you, Viola?"

"No, Mummy."

"There, you see...It's absurd. And what a thing to say! Really, it's disgusting!"

"None the less, Mrs O'Neill, she's pregnant."

"But how many times do I have to tell you...?" And again Mrs O'Neill patiently explained (nothing was achieved by losing one's temper) that what Viola wanted was a diet, nothing more complicated than that. But the old doctor persisted in being obstinate and senile. Gradually it became clear to Mrs O'Neill that it did no good to explain anything to him, however patiently. The old boy was beyond it. His mind was made up and there was no hope of making him see reason. Dr Ryan, who had served Kilnalough so well for so many years (and this was true, he *had* done a splendid job, one must give him his due), had at last reached the end of his career in medicine. In some ways it was rather sad. But it was no use complaining.

Dr Ryan shuffled as far as the gate with his visitors and watched them walk away towards the main street. Then with a sigh he made his slow and laborious way round the house to the back garden, where the Major was sitting in a deck-chair reading a newspaper.

On his last day in Kilnalough the Major paid a melancholy visit to the charred rubble which was now all that remained of the Majestic. He did not linger there, however, because he had a train to catch. Besides, there was very little to see except that great collection of wash-basins and lavatory bowls which had crashed from one burning floor to another until they reached the ground. He inspected the drips of molten glass which had collected like candle-grease beneath the windows. He noted the large number of delicate little skeletons (the

charred and roasted demons had been picked clean by the rats). He stepped from one blackened compartment to another trying to orientate himself and saying: “I’m standing in the residents’ lounge, in the corridor, in the writing-room.” Now that these rooms were open to the mild Irish sky they all seemed much smaller—in fact, quite insignificant. As he was carefully stepping over a large pile of wood-ash (which he suspected must have once been the massive front door) he looked back and happened to notice something white, half concealed by rubble. It was the statue of Venus, strangely undamaged. It was much too heavy for him to lift by himself, but when he got back to Kilnalough he made arrangements for it to be packed and shipped to London.

As it turned out, this lady of white marble was the only bride the Major succeeded in bringing back with him from Ireland in that year of 1921. But he was still troubled by thoughts of Sarah. His love for her perched inside him, motionless, like a sick bird. For many weeks he continued to think about her painfully. And then one day, without warning, the bird left its perch inside him and flew away into the outer darkness and he was at peace. Yet even many years later he would sometimes think of her. And once or twice he thought he glimpsed her in the street.

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The Siege of Krishnapur

J.G. Farrell

Introduction by Pankaj Mishra

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Introduction

In 1857, the eighth Earl of Elgin was on his way to punish the Manchu rulers of China for daring to close the city of Canton to British opium traders when he heard about the Indian Mutiny. The anti-British insurrections were confined to North India, especially the Gangetic Plain, from where most of the mutinous sepoys, or Indian soldiers, of the British East India Company had been recruited. But they threatened to undo all that the British had gained in India in the previous hundred years. Elgin immediately diverted his punitive expedition to India and spent a few anxious weeks in Calcutta, waiting for news of British victories, before moving on to deal with the Chinese.

Elgin was a reluctant imperialist. "I hate the whole thing so much that I cannot trust myself to write about it," he wrote in his diary as British warships under his command bombarded and killed two hundred civilians in Canton. In Calcutta, living in a mansion modeled on Kedleston Hall in England, he wrote of the three or four hundred servants that surrounded him:

> One moves among them with perfect indifference, treating them not as dogs, because in that case one would whistle to them and pat them, but as machines with which one can have no communion or sympathy. When the passions of fear and hatred are grafted on this indifference, the result is frightful; an absolute callousness as to the sufferings of the objects of those passions....

As a police officer in Burma, forced to shoot an elephant he didn't particularly want to shoot, George Orwell felt acutely the degradations colonialism imposed as much on the oppressor as on the oppressed. Trapped into roles and actions not of his choosing, even the reluctant imperialist, Orwell thought, "becomes a sort of hollow, posing dummy, the conventionalized figure of a sahib.... He wears a mask, and his face grows to fit it."

But the outraged feelings of a few individuals do not disturb much the impersonal business of modern empires. A range of influential men in Britain—Edmund Burke as well as John Stuart Mill—spoke up for the Indian victims of the East India Company. But they had little impact on the real rulers of India, whom Burke denounced as "young men (boys almost)" who rule "without sympathy with the natives," the "birds of prey" who make their fortune before either "Nature [or] reason have any opportunity to exert themselves for remedy of the excesses of their premature power."

In the decades before the mutiny, these officials of the East India Company had radically disrupted India's old social and economic order. They had forced skilled artisans and craftsmen to become petty commodity producers while turning India from an exporter of high-quality luxury items into a supplier of raw materials for the Industrial Revolution in England. Their extortionate demands for agricultural revenue had forced an older class of landholders and peasants into debt and destitution.

Confronted with Belgian rapacity and destructiveness in the Congo, the narrator of Joseph Conrad's novel *Heart of Darkness* claims that

> the conquest of the earth which mostly means the taking it away from those who have a different complexion or slightly flatter noses than ourselves, is not a pretty thing when you look into it too much. What redeems is the idea only. An idea at the back of it; not a sentimental pretense but an idea; and an unselfish belief in the idea—something you can set up, and bow down before, and offer a sacrifice to....

The East India Company chose to redeem its presence in India with the idea that it was the carrier of a higher civilization, bringing the fruits of science, rationality, and progress to lesser peoples. But this evangelical spirit of reform, which sought to undermine Indian social and religious customs, only succeeded in further alienating many Indians, particularly those living in the Gangetic Plain. Even a traveler as unsympathetic to Indians as Richard F. Burton, the translator of the *Kamasutra*, could see in 1856 how arrogant the British had become in India and how hated they were by many Indians. The mutiny, when it erupted, shocked the British, particularly "Cawnpore" (Kanpur), as it was remembered by the British for decades afterwards, where Indian peasant soldiers treacherously massacred more than four hundred British men, women, and children after promising them a safe passage down the river to the city of Allahabad.

The British had managed to dominate India primarily through the threat of violence—in 1857 there were 34,000 European soldiers to 257,000 Indians in the British army. The widespread rebellion made them fear, as the first British historian of the mutiny, John Kaye, put it, "those whom we had taught to fear us"; and predictably, the British first sought to restore the balance of terror.

Soon after hearing the first reports of the mutiny, the British had killed hundreds of Indians as part of what an officer in the Punjab called a "prompt and stern initiative" of "striking terror" among the "semi-barbarous natives"—these preemptive killings by the British were carried out well before they heard about the massacre in Cawnpore. Later, as the British regained control, tens of thousands of Indians were hanged, shot, or blown to pieces from the mouth of cannons. The reprisals were widely covered by such "embedded" journalists as

William Howard Russell, who had written about the Crimean War and was to report on the Civil War in America. They were supported aggressively by a British public fed on exaggerated stories of rebel atrocities. Even Charles Dickens felt provoked enough to wish that the British would inflict even greater atrocities in return.

Queen Victoria's proclamation in 1858 finally ended the rule of the East India Company and made India formally part of the British Empire. But the press coverage given to the mutiny and its suppression had already made India seem a British possession to the British public, which had previously not much cared or known about what most of their peers were up to in India. British control over India until 1857 had benefited only the shareholders of the East India Company. Now, as the historian Charles Trevelyan put it, the mutiny "irresistibly reminded us that we *were* an imperial race, holding our own on a conquered soil by dint of valour and foresight."

In Britain in the late nineteenth century, poets, dramatists, novelists, and journalists wrote copiously about Indian brutality in Cawnpore and British fortitude in Lucknow, where British people trapped in the Residency, the official residence of administrators, held out for five months against mutineers, disease, and starvation in what came to be called the "Siege of Lucknow." The image of the Indian darkened; his deviousness set in sharper contrast the altruism and generosity of the British; and the stoically brave Christian soldier emerged as a new model of Victorian masculinity. Maud Diver and Flora Annie Steel were only the more prominent of novelists who worked with these stereotypes in the commercially lucrative genre of the "mutiny novel."

The rules of this genre, which lasted slightly beyond the Victorian era, were simple:

> The hero, who is an officer, meets the young charming lady, just out from England, or who happens to be in India from before, and falls in love or both come to India in the same ship, and strike a liking on board the ship itself. In India the historical situation is already ripe for mutiny, and the lovers are suddenly pitched into the upheaval.*

When in the early 1970s J. G. Farrell used the siege of Lucknow as a broad setting for his fifth novel, *The Siege of Krishnapur*, the second in a trilogy of novels about the British Empire, he used the basic formula of the mutiny novel, which was then obsolete, while subverting its rules and dissolving its partriotism in irony and comedy. Born in 1935, Farrell was only twelve years old when India became free from British rule. He saw the British Empire unravel in his own lifetime, and become, in the hands of such novelists as Paul Scott and Anthony Burgess, a subject that could be treated not only without sentimentality but with vigorous skepticism and irreverence.

Farrell's main protagonist, George Fleury, arrives in Calcutta and meets a charming lady called Louise Dunstaple just as news of the first insurrections in the hinterland filters in. Unlike the dashing officers of previous mutiny novels, Fleury is a civilian and a bit of a romantic. He thinks that "civilization as it is now denatures man. Think of the mills and the furnaces..." and believes that what "was required was a completely different aspect of it...its spiritual, its mystical side, the side of the heart!"

Such views are inconvenient partly because Fleury has been commissioned by the East India Company to write a book "describing the advances that civilization had made in India under the Company rule" and partly because they do not much impress Louise, who seems more keen on flirting with the crudely philistine army men who resemble her brother, Lieutenant Harry Dunstaple.

Fleury and Louise first meet amid the flurry of social events that constitute the life of the British ruling class in Calcutta, the exuberant round of tea parties, dances, and picnics where people work hard at being British, to pretend "as if all this were taking place not in India but in some temperate land far away."

No Indians are allowed to enter this privileged realm. Nevertheless, the absence of Indian character in a novel set in India, apart from a somewhat effete, not very convincing prince, may seem more striking now than in the nineteenth century. Farrell may have been deterred by the technical problems of rendering Indian speech without turning Indian characters into Cockneys. But his decision to leave out Indian characters seems to have largely stemmed from an honest view of his experience of India.

The diaries he kept during his research trip to India in 1971 reveal that he was bewildered, even "defeated," by the strangeness of the people and the landscape. Rather than invent some implausible Indian characters, Farrell confined himself to describing the insular British and their claim to rule justly a country they, like Farrell, didn't, or couldn't, much understand.

The Collector of the fictional town of Krishnapur exemplifies what Farrell saw as the ambitions and delusions of British rule over India—the elaborate imperial self-deception which is the true subject of *The Siege of Krishnapur*. The Collector has little knowledge of, or empathy with, Indians. He is content to possess what Conrad called the "idea," which is really an aggressive ideology of science, rationality, and progress. He is a member of many progressive societies, a fervent admirer of the Great Exhibition, which was held in Britain in 1851 to showcase scientific and technological advances, and he has "devoted a substantial part of his fortune to bringing out to India examples of European art and science in the belief that he was doing as once the Romans had done in Britain." These examples include statuettes in electro-metal of Dr. Johnson, Voltaire, Shakespeare, Keats, and Molière.

Farrell's postcolonial cynicism often borders on the burlesque. But it also makes for brisk economy while presenting the moral blindness of some of the characters. Louise's brother Harry Dunstaple earnestly advises Fleury that "you have to be careful thrashing a Hindu, George, because they have very weak chests and you can kill them.... "

Farrell's characters talk a great deal, and reveal themselves quickly. We know the diverse personalities and opinions of all the major protagonists well before Krishnapur erupts in violence and chaos. Here, for instance, is the opium agent, Rayne, admiring the wealth the British made by forcibly exporting Indian opium to China and turning millions of Chinese into opium addicts:

> Opium, even more than salt, is a great source of revenue of our own creation.... And who pays it? Why, John Chinaman...who prefers our opium to any other. That's what I call progress.

The Collector thinks this a limited ideal of progress:

> It's not simply to acquire wealth, but to acquire *through* wealth, that superior way of life which we loosely term civilization and which includes so many things.... The spreading of the Gospel on the one hand, the spreading of the railways on the other.... Both the poet and the Opium Agent are necessary to our scheme of things. What d'you say, Padre?

The padre, a former rowing man at Oxford, is happy to go along with imperialism, as long as the spreading of the railways allows him to spread the Gospel, although he is "afraid that the duties to which the Lord had called him might prove too much for this strength."

Though widely regarded as an eccentric, the Collector alone has premonitions of an impending assault by the invisible natives. He orders the digging of trenches and the building of mud fortifications. The news that Europeans in a nearby town have been massacred forces the British community of Krishnapur to retreat to the Residency, and to deploy all able-bodied men in its defense.

As it turns out, British fortitude is not shared equally across British class divisions. The Collector's manservant, Vokins, for instance, lacks

> the broader view. He tended only to see the prospect of the Death of Vokins. Although some of the Collector's guests might have been hard put to it to think of what a man of Vokins's class had to lose, to Vokins it was very clear what he had to lose: namely his life. He was not at all anxious to leave his skin on the Indian plains; he wanted to take it back to the slums of Soho or wherever it came from.

The attack on the Residency eventually comes in the form of flying musket balls, and rash cavalry charges, and is barely resisted by such poorly equipped and inept British defenders as Harry and Fleury, respectively. As the attacks continue, and the casualties grow, the British try to keep up their rituals and hierarchies within the Residency. Dinner is as formal as ever; the respectable wives of officials keep a fastidious distance from Lucy, the fallen woman; and the debates about the pros and cons of civilization become even more heated.

Though tested by the uprising, the padre remains optimistic: "Our European civilization, which is rapidly uniting all the nations of the earth by means of railways, steamvessels and the Electric Telegraph, is the forerunner of an inevitable absorption of all other faiths into the One Faith of the white ruler."

The pedantic Fleury, who is learning to kill, and even to enjoy the mechanical aspect of weapons, pursues Louise in his spare time with such declarations as, "It's so important that we bring to India a civilization of the heart, and not only to India but to the whole world...rather than this sordid materialism."

Farrell doesn't ever abandon his inquiry into the moral justifications for imperialism. But he also has a comic purpose. He seems to have seen the men involved in imperialist adventures as acting out roles in an unscripted farce. It is why *The Siege of Krishnapur* never seems ponderous. When during the heat of the monsoons a cloud of cockchafers settles on Lucy, who has been abandoned by her lover, its falls to the virginal young men, Fleury and Harry, to scrape the black insects off her naked and unconscious body with boards torn from the Bible:

> Her body, both young men were interested to discover, was remarkably like the statues of young women they had seen.... The only significant difference...was that Lucy had pubic hair; this caused them a bit of a surprise at first. It was not something that had ever occurred to them as possible, likely, or even desirable.
>
> "D'you think this is *supposed* to be here?" asked Harry, who had spent a moment or two scraping at it ineffectually with his board. Because the hair, too, was black it was hard to be sure that it was not simply matted and dried insects.
>
> "That's odd," said Fleury, peering at it with interest; he had never seen anything like it on a statue. "Better leave it, anyway, for the time being. We can always come back to it later when we've done the rest."

As the situation deteriorates inside the Residency, Farrell's descriptions acquire a surreal edge:

> The smell, which was so atrocious that the butchers had to work with cloths tied over their noses, came from rejected offal which they were in the habit of throwing over the wall in the hope that the vultures would deal with it. But the truth was that the scavengers of the district, both birds and animals, were already thoroughly bloated from the results of the first attack...the birds were so heavy with meat that they could hardly launch themselves into the air, the jackals could hardly drag themselves back to their lairs.

The heat grows more intense and bodies killed by cholera or the mutineers fill up graves. But the tea parties go on, if without tea; birthdays are celebrated, and meals of horse flesh consumed in the cramped quarters of the underdressed women. The rituals of courtship, too, go on. Fleury continues to pursue Louise and Harry falls for Lucy.

Long-cherished beliefs, however, are beginning to weaken inside the Residency. It is becoming clear that "India itself was now a different place; the fiction of happy natives being led forward along the road to civilization could no longer be sustained." The Collector wonders

> how it could ever be that the hundred and fifty million people living in India could ever have the social advantages that made young people like the Fleurys and the Dunstaples so delightful, so confident, and so charming.... Would Science and Political Economy ever be powerful enough to give them a life of ease and respectability?

As the mutineers press closer, the Collector's electrometal statuettes of European geniuses are beheaded, and the heads deployed as cannon fodder:

> The most effective of all had been Shakespeare's; it had scythed its way through a whole astonished platoon of sepoys advancing in single file through the jungle. The Collector suspected that the Bard's success in this respect might have a great deal to do with the ballistic advantages stemming from his baldness.

The head of Keats with its luxuriant metal growth is not as effective; and it is not surprising, given the changing view of progress inside the Residency, that Voltaire's head gets stuck in the cannon.

Weak and exhausted, the padre thinks he was mistaken to praise the Great Exhibition, the "Vanity Fair of materialism." The Collector, too, remembers with regret the

> extraordinary array of chains and fetters, manacles and shackles exhibited by Birmingham for export to America's slave states.... Well, he had never pretended that science and industry were good *in themselves*, of course...they still had to be used correctly. All the same, he should have thought a great deal more about what lay behind the exhibits....

"Feelings," the Collector is convinced by the end of the siege, are "just as important as ideas." But his conversion to a quasi-Bloomsbury ethic is less dramatic than Fleury's new and unqualified regard for the go-getting Victorian civilization. By the end of the siege, Fleury has "discovered the manly pleasures to be found in inventing things, in making things work, in getting results, in cause and effect. In short, he had identified himself at last with the spirit of the times."

"Ideas make us what we are," Fleury asserts when years after the siege he runs into the Collector. But Farrell gives the last word to the Collector. In his old age he has the melancholy awareness that "one uses up so many options, so much energy, simply in trying to find out what life is all about," and that, in the end, there is not much that one can do to change it. Intellectual knowledge, or its inferior form, technical know-how, is not enough. In any case, a people or a nation is shaped not by ideas but "by other forces, of which it has little knowledge."

"There exists no great English novel," V.S. Naipaul once wrote, "in which the growth of national or imperial consciousness is chronicled." But this novel could not have been written when success of every sort attended the British venture in the world and novelists, even liberal ones like Dickens, embraced the assumptions of national and imperial superiority.

The Victorian faith in science, rationality, and progress, which first the Collector and then Fleury uphold, was to be badly mauled on the battlefields of the First World War. Its collapse partly gave E.M. Forster the confidence in *A Passage to India* (1924) to accuse the British in India of having an "undeveloped heart." But it took another world war and the disastrous partition of India before British novelists could properly examine the complacent attitudes fostered during the high noon of empire.

As Paul Scott described in what now seems one of the first great works of postcolonial literature, *The Raj Quartet*, the British had made India a part of a noble idea about themselves. But there was not much Conradian sense of duty in sight as the British packed their bags after hurriedly dividing India and as

hundreds of thousands of Indians killed and displaced each other. With the partition of India, “the British came to the end of themselves as they were.” Scott evoked the grubby last days of an imperial fantasy, the discarding of a tattered mask. It was Farrell’s achievement to describe how tentatively the mask was first worn —in a sophisticated novel of ideas that is also an entertaining comic adventure.

—PANKAJ MISHRA

*Shailendra Dhari Singh, *Novels on the Indian Mutiny* (New Delhi: Arnold-Heinemann India, 1973) p. 183.

For W. F. F.

Part One

1

Anyone who has never before visited Krishnapur, and who approaches from the east, is likely to think he has reached the end of his journey a few miles sooner than he expected. While still some distance from Krishnapur he begins to ascend a shallow ridge. From here he will see what appears to be a town in the heat-distorted distance. He will see the white glitter of walls and roofs and a handsome grove of trees, perhaps even the dome of what might be a temple. Round about there will be the unending plain still, exactly as it has been for many miles back, a dreary ocean of bald earth, in the immensity of which an occasional field of sugar cane or mustard is utterly lost.

The surprising thing is that this plain is not quite deserted, as one might expect. As he crosses it towards the white walls in the distance the traveller may notice an occasional figure way out somewhere between the road and the horizon, a man walking with a burden on his head in one direction or another...even though, at least to the eye of a stranger, within the limit of the horizon there does not appear to be anywhere worth walking to, unless perhaps to that distant town he has spotted; one part looks quite as good as another. But if you look closely and shield your eyes from the glare you will make out tiny villages here and there, difficult to see because they are made of the same mud as the plain they came from; and no doubt they melt back into it again during the rainy season, for there is no lime in these parts, no clay or shale that you can burn into bricks, no substance hard enough to resist the seasons over the years.

Sometimes the village crouches in a grove of bamboo and possesses a frightful pond with a water-buffalo or two; more often there is just a well to be worked from dawn till dusk by the same two men and two bullocks every single day in their lives. But whether there is a pond or not hardly matters to a traveller; in either case there is no comfort here, nothing that a European might recognize as civilization. All the more reason for him to press on, therefore, towards those distant white walls which are clearly made of bricks. Bricks are undoubtedly an essential ingredient of civilization; one gets nowhere at all without them.

But as he approaches he will see that this supposed town is utterly deserted; it is merely a melancholy cluster of white domes and planes surrounded by a few trees. There are no people to be seen. Everything lies perfectly still. Nearer again, of course, he will see that it is not a town at all, but one of those ancient cemeteries that are called “Cities of the Silent”, which one occasionally comes across in northern India. Perhaps a rare traveller will turn off the road to rest in the shade of a mango grove which separates the white tombs from a dilapidated mosque; sometimes one may find incense left smouldering in an earthenware saucer by an unseen hand. But otherwise there is no life here; even the rustling leaves have a dead sound.

Krishnapur itself had once been the centre of civil administration for a large district. At that time European bungalows had been built there on a lavish scale, even small palaces standing in grounds of several acres to house the Company representatives of the day who lived in magnificent style and sometimes even, in imitation of the native princes, kept tigers and mistresses and heaven knows what else. But then the importance of Krishnapur declined and these magnificent officials moved elsewhere. Their splendid bungalows were left shuttered and empty; their gardens ran wild during the rainy season and for the rest of the year dried up into deserts, over whose baked earth whirlwinds of dust glided back and forth like ghostly dancers.

Now with the creaking of loose shutters and the sighing of the wind in the tall grass, the cantonment has the air of a place you might see in a melancholy dream; a visitor might well find himself reminded of the “City of the Silent” he had passed on his way to Krishnapur.

The first sign of trouble at Krishnapur came with a mysterious distribution of chapatis, made of coarse flour and about the size and thickness of a biscuit; towards the end of February 1857, they swept the countryside like an epidemic.

One evening, in the room he used as a study the Collector, Mr Hopkins, opened a despatch box and, instead of the documents he had expected, found four chapatis. After a moment’s surprise and annoyance he called the *khansamah*, an elderly man who had been in his service for several years and whom he trusted. He showed him the open despatch box and the chapatis inside. The *khansamah*’s normally impassive face displayed shock. He was clearly no less taken aback than the Collector himself. He stared at the purple despatch box for some moments before picking the chapatis out of it respectfully, as if the box had a personal dignity of its own that might have been offended. The Collector with a frown gestured to him to remove the wretched things. A little later he overheard the *khansamah* shouting at the bearers, evidently convinced that they were responsible for a reckless practical joke.

The Collector was busy at that time. In addition to his official duties, which had been swollen and complicated by the illness of the Joint Magistrate, he had a number of domestic matters on his mind; his wife,

too, had been in poor health for the past few months and must now be sent home before the hot weather.

It is unlikely, given his other preoccupations, that the Collector would even have noticed the second pile of chapatis had his eye not been led towards them by a column of ants; the ants were issuing from a crevice between two flagstones and their thin column passed within a few inches of his shoes on its way to the chapatis. The chapatis had a grimy and scorched appearance; again there were four of them and they had been left on the top step of the brick portico which provided the main entrance to the Residency. The Collector had stepped out on to the portico for a breath of air. He hesitated for a moment, on the point of calling the *khansamah* again, but then he noticed the sweeper working not far away; he watched for a while as the man progressed, sitting on his heels and sweeping rather indiscriminately, with a bundle of twigs as a broom. No doubt the chapatis on the portico were the property of the sweeper. The Collector went inside again, dismissing the matter from his mind.

The following afternoon, however, he found four more chapatis. This time they were not in his study but on the desk in his office, neatly arranged beside some papers. Though there was still nothing very menacing about them, as soon as he saw them he knew beyond doubt that there was going to be trouble. He examined them carefully but this told him nothing, except that they were rather dirty.

The Collector was a large and handsome man. He wore low side-whiskers which he kept carefully trimmed but which nevertheless sprouted out stiffly like the ruff of a cat. He dressed fastidiously: the high collars which he habitually wore were sufficiently unusual in a country station like Krishnapur to make a deep impression on all who saw him. He was a man of considerable dignity, too, with a keen, but erratic, sense of social proprieties. Not surprisingly, he was held in awe by the European community; no doubt this was partly because they could not see his faults very clearly. In private he was inclined to be moody and overbearing with his family, and sometimes careless over matters which others might regard as of great importance...for example although he had seven children, and was living in a country of high mortality for Europeans, he had not yet brought himself to make a will; an unfortunate lapse of his usually powerful sense of duty.

At that moment he happened to be alone in the office, one of a number of rooms in a part of the Residency set aside for Government business. He was not fond of this room; its bleak, official aspect displeased him and usually he preferred to work in his study, situated in a more domestic part of the building. The office contained only a few overloaded shelves, a couple of wooden chairs for those rare visitors whose rank entitled them to be seated in his presence, and his own desk, untidily strewn with papers and despatch boxes; the person who had placed the offending chapatis on it had had to clear a space for them. On one of the lateral walls was a portrait of the young Queen with rather bulging blue eyes and a vigorous appearance.

Disturbed, and having now forgotten the reason he had gone to his office in the first place, he made his way slowly back towards the hall of the Residency, wondering whether certain measures might be taken to palliate the effects of this approaching, but still hypothetical, trouble, or even to avoid it altogether. “Just supposing that serious trouble should break out in Krishnapur...an insurrection, for instance,...where could we find shelter? Could the Residency, merely as a matter of interest, of course, be defended?”

As he stood in the hall pondering this question the Collector experienced a sensation of coolness and great tranquillity. During the daytime the light here came from a great distance; it came between the low arches of the verandah, across cool flagstones, through the green louvred windows known as “jilmils” let into the immensely thick walls, and, at last, in the form of a pleasant, reflected twilight, to where he was standing. One felt very safe here. The walls, which were built of enormous numbers of the pink, wafer-like bricks of British India, were so very thick...you could see yourself how thick they were.

The Residency was more or less in the shape of a church, that is, if you can imagine a church which one entered by stepping over the altar. The transept, as you stand on the altar looking in, was formed by, on the left, a library well furnished with everything but books, of which there was only a meagre supply, some having been borrowed and not returned, some eaten by the ubiquitous ants, and some having simply vanished nobody knew where; yet others, imprisoned, glumly pressed their spines against the glass of cabinets whose keys had been lost...and on the right, a drawing-room, lofty, spacious and gracious. Immediately facing you in the nave was a magnificent marble staircase, a relic of the important days of Krishnapur when things were still done properly. Behind the staircase the dining-room, together with a number of other rooms having to do in some way with eating or with European servants or with children, ran along the rest of the nave which was flanked on each side by deep verandahs. The building was of two storeys, if you discount the twin towers which rose somewhat higher. From one of these towers the Union Jack fluttered from dawn till dusk; on the other the Collector sometimes set up a telescope when the mood took him to scrutinize the heavens.

The Collector, whose mind had returned to browse on chapatis, gave a start as a man’s voice issued loudly from the open door of the drawing-room nearby. “The mind is furnished,” declared the voice in a tone which did not invite debate, “with a vast apparatus of mental organs for enabling it to manifest its energies. Thus, when aided by optical and auditory nerves, the mind sees and hears; when assisted by an organ of cautiousness it feels fear, by an organ of causality it reasons.”

“What nonsense!” muttered the Collector, who had recognized the voice as belonging to the Magistrate and had now remembered that he himself should be sitting in the drawing-room at this moment for the fortnightly meeting of the Krishnapur Poetry Society was due to begin...indeed, had already begun, since the Magistrate was holding forth, though not apparently about poetry.

“Dr Gall of Vienna, who discovered this remarkable science, happened to notice while still at school that those of his fellow students who were good at learning by heart tended to have bulging eyes. By degrees he also found external characteristics which indicated a disposition for painting, music, and the mechanical arts...”

“I really must go in,” thought the Collector, and reflecting that, after all, as President of the Society it was his duty, he took a few firm steps towards the door, but again he hesitated, this time standing in the open doorway itself. From here he could see a dozen ladies of the cantonment sitting apprehensively on chairs facing the Magistrate. Many of these ladies held sheaves of paper densely covered with verse of their own devising, and it was the sight of all this verse which had caused the Collector to hesitate involuntarily at the very last moment. Behind the ladies his four older children, aged from four to sixteen, all girls (the two boys were at school in England), sat in a despairing row. They took no part in these proceedings but he considered it healthy to expose them to artistic endeavour. Only the youngest, still a baby, was excused attendance.

Unaware that the President of their Society was lingering at the door, the ladies stared at the Magistrate as if hypnotized, but very likely they did not hear a single word he said; they would be in far too great anxiety as to the fate of their verses to listen to him discoursing on phrenology, a subject in which only he found any interest. Soon the moment would come when they would read their works and the Magistrate would pronounce sentence on them, a moment which they both desired and dreaded. The Collector, however, only dreaded it. This was not because of the low standard of the verse, but because the Magistrate’s judgements were invariably pitiless, and even, at times when he became excited, verged on the insulting. Why the ladies put up with it and still returned week after week for their poems to be subjected to such indignities was more than the Collector could fathom.

Yet it was the Collector himself who was responsible for this fortnightly torment since it was he who had founded the Society. He had done so partly because he was a believer in the ennobling powers of literature, and partly because he was sorry for the ladies of the cantonment who had, particularly during the hot season, so little to occupy them. At first he had been pleased with the ladies’ enthusiasm and had considered the plan a success...but then he had made the mistake of inviting Tom Willoughby, the Magistrate. The Magistrate suffered from the disability of a free-thinking turn of mind and from a life that was barren and dreary to match. To make things worse, he was married, but in the celibate manner of so many English “civilians”. The Collector had eyed the Magistrate’s marriage with complacent pity: his wife, imported from England, had stayed two or three years in India until driven home by the heat, the boredom and a fortuitous pregnancy. Ah, the Collector had witnessed this sad story so often during his time in India! And now, though later than most, it seemed that his own marriage, which had survived so long in this arduous climate, must suffer a similar fate, for his wife, Caroline, sitting nervously in the front row with her own sheaf of poems, would soon be sailing from Calcutta. Such was the reward for complacency, he reflected, not without a certain stern satisfaction at the justice of this retribution.

“Oh, there’s Mr Hopkins,” said the Magistrate, ending his discourse abruptly as he caught sight of the Collector lurking in the doorway. And the Collector was obliged to step forward smiling, as if in anticipation of the poetry that would soon be gratifying his ears.

An empty chair had been placed beside the Magistrate, who was somewhat younger than the Collector and had the red hair and ginger whiskers of the born atheist; his face wore a constant expression of cynical surprise, one eyebrow raised and the corner of his mouth compressed, as far as one could make out beneath the growth of whiskers which here varied from ginger to cinnamon. It was said in the cantonment that he even slept with one eyebrow raised; the Collector did not know if there was any truth in this.

At one time everyone had sat in a circle and every member of the Society had been willing to voice an opinion on the poem which had just been read. Those were the days when every single poem had bristled with good qualities like a hedgehog and had glutted itself with praise like a jackal, the happy days before the Magistrate had been invited. Soon after his arrival the circle had begun to disintegrate, the ladies had progressively dropped away from each side of him until, soon, they faced him in a semi-circle, and now, at last, directly, as if in the dock. The Collector had bravely installed himself at the Magistrate’s side in order to plead mitigating circumstances.

By this time the poetry reading had begun and Mrs Worseley, wife of one of the railway engineers, had faltered to the end of a sonnet about an erl-king. Everyone, including the Collector, was now watching the Magistrate in dismay, waiting for his verdict; although sure about most things, the Collector lacked confidence in his own judgement when it came to poetry and was obliged to defer to the Magistrate, but not without the private suspicion that his own judgement might be superior after all.

“Mrs Worseley, I found your poem defective in metre, rhyme, and invention. And to be quite honest I consider that we’ve had far too many erl-kings in recent weeks, though I can assure you that even one erl-king would be more than enough for me.” Mrs Worseley hung her head, but looked quite relieved, thinking that she had got off lightly.

Mrs Adams, a senior lady, the wife of a recently retired judge, now read in a commanding voice a long poem of which the Collector could make neither head nor tail, though it seemed to have something to do with

Nature, serpents, and the fall of Troy. He allowed his mind to wander and, as his eyes came to rest on his wife, he thought that if there should indeed be trouble at Krishnapur it was just as well that she would not be there to see it; perhaps he should have insisted that the children go home with her; he would have done so but he had feared that the fuss, even if the *ayah* went too, would be too much for her nerves...Never mind, he had almost decided to retire in a year's time, at the end of the next cold season. He did not have to worry, as did the poor Magistrate, about securing a pension. He had a glorious and interesting life awaiting him in England whenever he considered that his duty in India was done.

But still those chapatis lodged in his mind, undissolved. In this room it was even harder to believe in trouble than it had been in the hall, indeed, it was hard to believe that one was in India at all, except for the punkahs. His eyes roamed with satisfaction over the walls, thickly armoured with paintings in oil and water-colour, with mirrors and glass cases containing stuffed birds and other wonders, over chairs and sofas upholstered in plum cretonne, over showcases of minerals and a cobra floating in a bottle of bluish alcohol, over occasional tables draped to the floor with heavy tablecloths on which stood statuettes in electro-metal of great men of literature, of Dr Johnson, of Molière, Keats, Voltaire and, of course, Shakespeare...but now he was obliged to return his attention to the proceedings.

Miss Carpenter had begun to read a poem in praise of the Great Exhibition; the Collector groaned inwardly, not because he found the subject unsuitable, but because it had so evidently been chosen as homage to himself; poems about the Exhibition recurred every few weeks and seldom failed to excite the Magistrate's most cutting remarks. This was undoubtedly because his own interest in the Exhibition was as well-known to the Magistrate as to the ladies; indeed, it was more than an interest for he had been a prominent member of the selection committee for the Bengal Presidency and, having taken his furlough in 1851, had attended the Exhibition in an official capacity. It was generally held in the cantonment that the Magistrate resented the fact that the Collector should be in with all the "big dogs" in the Company simply because he was in the habit of collecting artistic and scientific bric à brac.

"Power, like the trunk of Afric's wondrous brute,
Had, on that stage, its double triumph found,
To lift the forest monarch by the root,
Or pick a quivering needle from the ground."

Although it was usually considered unwise to offer explanations to the Magistrate as you went along, Miss Carpenter was unable to prevent herself explaining that this image of the Exhibition was a reference to the versatile talent of Edmund Burke. But as the air of interrogation among her fellow poetesses only deepened as a result of this explanation she was obliged to add an explanation to her explanation, to the effect that this talent of Burke's had been compared to an elephant's trunk, which could uproot an oak or pick up a needle. The ladies shifted their terrified eyes to the Magistrate to see how he was responding; his face remained ominously impassive, however, beneath its ginger growth. Miss Carpenter bravely proceeded:

"Whilst they, the Royal Founders of the scene,
Through ranks of gazing myriads calmly move,
And Britons throng to proffer to their Queen
The willing dues of loyalty and love."

"Really, this is not at all bad," thought the Collector in spite of his alarm on her behalf; he was fond of Miss Carpenter, who was serious and pretty, and anxious to please.

"Pebbles and shells which little children find
Of rainbow-tinted hues, on ocean's shore;
Though full of learning to the thoughtful mind,
Themselves how vain, how shortly seen no more!"

"How excellent, how serious! The girl has a remarkable gift." The Collector was surprised to find himself responding to a poem composed by one of the ladies; hitherto he had considered the poems of value only for their therapeutic properties. Alas, Miss Carpenter had been unable to resist appending yet another explanation: that this last verse was a reference to Newton's description of himself as "only a child picking up pebbles on the shore of the great ocean of truth". This was altogether too much for the Magistrate. "Half of this poem appears to have been copied from books, Miss Carpenter, and the other half is plainly rubbish. It's entirely beyond my understanding why you should feel you have to say 'Afric's wondrous brute' instead of 'elephant' like everyone else, and 'forest monarch' instead of 'tree'. Nobody in his right mind goes about calling trees 'forest monarchs'...I've really never heard such nonsense!"

The ladies gasped at this frontal attack, not just on poor Miss Carpenter, but on poetry itself. If you can't call an elephant Afric's wondrous brute" what *can* you call it? Why write poetry at all? Miss Carpenter's eyes filled with tears.

“Look here, Tom, that’s very extreme,” grumbled the Collector, displeased. “I found it a very fine poem indeed. One of the best we’ve heard, I should think. Mind you,” he added as his confidence once more deserted him, “the subject of the Exhibition, as you know, is one that holds a particular interest for me.”

Miss Carpenter coloured prettily at this speech and appeared not to hear the Magistrate’s derisive: “Ha!” “The fellow is quite impossible!” mused the Collector crossly.

Not everyone, the Collector was aware, is improved by the job he does in life; some people are visibly disimproved. The Magistrate had performed his duties for the Company conscientiously but they had not had a good effect on him: they had made him cynical, fatalistic, and too enamoured of the rational. His interest in phrenology, too, had had a bad effect; it had reinforced the determinism which had sapped his ideals, for he evidently believed that all one’s acts were limited by the shape of one’s skull. Given the swelling above and behind the ear on each side of his skull (he had once insinuated) there was not very much the Collector could do to remedy his inability to make rapid decisions...Though, of course, one could not be “absolutely sure” without making exact measurements. He had also begun to say something about a bump on each side of the Collector’s crown which signified “love of approbation”, but noticing, at last, how badly the Collector was responding to this opportunity for self-knowledge he had desisted with a sigh.

“By the way, Tom,” said the Collector as the meeting broke up, “I found something odd on my desk in the office just now. Four chapatis, to be exact. And yesterday I found some in a despatch box. What d’you make of it?”

“That’s strange. I found some too.” The two men looked at each other, surprised.

Presently they heard that chapatis were turning up all over Krishnapur. The Padre had found some on the steps of the Church and had assumed that they were some sort of superstitious offering. Mr Barlow, who worked in the Salt Agency, had been brought some by his watchman. Mr Rayne who, in addition to his official duties at the opium factory, was the Honorary Secretary of the Krishnapur Mutton Club and of the Ice Club, was shown chapatis by the watchmen employed in the protection of both these institutions. It soon became clear that it was chiefly among the watchmen that the chapatis were circulating; they had been given them by watchmen from other districts, without apparently knowing for what purpose, and told to bake more and then pass them on again to watchmen of yet other districts. The Collector discovered by questioning his own watchman that it was he who had left the chapatis on the desk in his office. Although he had baked twelve more chapatis and passed them on, as he had been instructed, he had felt it his duty to inform the Collector Sahib and so had left them on his desk. He denied any knowledge of those in the despatch box and on the portico. Where these came from the Collector never discovered.

In due course an even more curious fact emerged. The chapatis were appearing not just in Krishnapur but in stations all over northern India. Not only the Collector found this disturbing; for a while no one in Krishnapur could talk of anything else. Again and again the watchmen were interrogated, but they seemed genuinely to have no idea what the purpose of it had been. Some said they had passed on the chapatis because they believed it to be the order of the Government, that the purpose had been to see how quickly messages could be passed on.

In Calcutta the Government held an enquiry, but no reason for the phenomenon came to light and the excitement it caused died down within a few days. It was suggested that it might be a superstitious attempt to avert an epidemic of cholera. Only the Collector remained convinced that trouble was coming. He half remembered having heard of a similar distribution of chapatis on some other occasion. Surely there had been something of the kind before the mutiny at Vellore? He asked everyone he met whether they had heard of it, but no one had.

Before leaving Krishnapur to escort his wife to Calcutta, where she was to embark for England, the Collector took a strange decision. He ordered the digging of a deep trench combined with a thick wall of earth “for drainage during the monsoon” all the way round the perimeter of the Residency compound.

“The Collector’s weakness appears to have found him,” observed the Magistrate lightly to Mr Ford, one of the railway engineers, as they smilingly surveyed the progress of this work.

2

It was during this winter that George Fleury arrived in Calcutta with his sister and first set eyes on Louise Dunstaple. It was hoped that something might come of this meeting for Fleury was not married and Louise, though not quite his social equal, was considered to be at the very height of her beauty...indeed, she was being talked of everywhere in Calcutta as the beauty of the cold season. She was very fair and pale and a little remote; one or two people thought her “insipid”, which is a danger blonde people sometimes run. She was remote, at least, in Fleury’s presence, but once he glimpsed her at the race-course, flirting chastely with some young officers.

Dr Dunstaple in those days was the civil surgeon at Krishnapur. But somehow he had managed to get himself and his family to Calcutta for the cold season, leaving the Krishnapur civilians to the tender mercies of Dr McNab, who had taken over as regimental surgeon and who was known to be in favour of some of the most alarmingly direct methods known to civilized medicine.

The Doctor had left his son Harry behind in Krishnapur, however. Thanks to the help of a friend in Fort William young Harry had been posted as an ensign to one of the native infantry regiments stationed at Krishnapur (or rather at Captainganj, five miles away) where his parents could keep an eye on him and see that he did not get into debt. Harry, who by now was a lieutenant, was quite content to be left behind when his family, which included little Fanny, aged twelve, went away to enjoy themselves in Calcutta; being "military" he tended these days to look with condescension upon civilians, and Calcutta was undoubtedly riddled with the fellows.

Nor was Mrs Dunstaple displeased that her son should stay in Krishnapur, though this meant that he would be away from her side. Harry was at a vulnerable age and Calcutta swarmed with ambitious mammas anxious to expose young officers like Harry to the charms of their daughters. Alas, Mrs Dunstaple well knew that India was full of young lieutenants who had ruined their careers at the outset by disastrous marriages. All the same, this consideration, as applied to Harry, did not prevent her from hoping to be able to show off the charms of Louise before suitable young men. In the East the roses in a girl's cheeks fly away so quickly, so very quickly (though, strictly speaking, this did not apply to Louise whose beauty was of the pale sort).

The Season had been unusually successful, and not only for Louise (who had shown herself hard to please, however, in the matter of proposals). There had been many splendid balls and an unusual number of weddings and other entertainments. Moreover, the Turf, which had fallen into a decline in recent years had revived wonderfully. Of course, you would be likely to see the same mounts in the Planters' Handicap as in the Merchants' Plate or the Bengal Club Cup but it was a season of remarkable horses, for this was the era of Legerdemain, Mercury, and of the great mare, Beeswing. But the cold season was nearing its end by the time Fleury and his sister, Miriam, arrived and new faces like theirs were longed for in Calcutta drawing-rooms; (by this time all the old faces were so familiar that they could hardly be looked at any more). Besides, it was known that their father was a Director, with all the social standing which that implied in the Company's India. It was also rumoured that young Fleury had scarcely been half an hour in India before Lord Canning had offered him a cigar. No wonder the news of his arrival caused some excitement in the Dunstaples' house in Alipore.

In spite of the very different ranks they now occupied in society Dr Dunstaple and Fleury's father had been at school together forty years earlier and still, after all this time, exchanged a gruff little letter on sporting matters once or twice a year, as between schoolboys. The Doctor had reason to be glad of this friendship for it was thanks to Sir Herbert Fleury that young Harry had been awarded a cadetship at Addiscombe, the Company's military college; these cadetships were in the gift of Directors.

In the course of their correspondence the elder Fleury had often mentioned his own son, George, in amongst the grouse, the pheasants and the foxes...George was going to Oxford and perhaps in due course would come out to India. But the years had gone by without any sign of young Fleury. Nor was he mentioned in his father's letters any more. Divining some domestic tragedy the Doctor had tactfully confined his own letters to pig-sticking and ortolans. Another two or three years had gone by and now, suddenly, when the Doctor was no longer expecting it, young Fleury had popped up again among the foxes. It seemed that he was coming to India to visit his mother's grave (twenty years earlier when Sir Herbert himself had been in India his young wife had died, leaving him with two small children); at the same time he had been commissioned by the Court of Directors to compose a small volume describing the advances that civilization had made in India under the Company rule. But those were only the ostensible reasons for his visit...the real reason that young Fleury was coming was the need to divert his recently widowed sister, Miriam, whose husband, Captain Lang, had been killed before Sebastopol.

Now George Fleury and his sister had arrived in Calcutta and Mrs Dunstaple had heard that he was making quite an impression. Even his clothes, said to be the last word in fashion, had become the talk of the city. It seemed that Fleury had been seen wearing what was positively the first "Tweedside" lounging jacket to make its appearance in the Bengal Presidency; this garment, daringly unwaisted, hung as straight as a sack of potatoes and was arousing the envy of every beau on the Chowringhee. At his wife's behest the Doctor sat down immediately and penned a warm invitation to Fleury and Miriam to join the Dunstaples on a family picnic they were planning to take in the Botanical Gardens. But even as he sealed his letter he could not help wondering whether Fleury would turn out to be quite what his wife expected. The fact was that Harry, while at Addiscombe, had once spent a few days with the Fleurys in the country and had later told his father about it. He had seen very little of George during his stay but one night, as he was going to bed, pleasantly tired after a day spent hunting with the elder Fleury, he had opened his window to the whirring, moonlit night and heard, very faintly, the strains of a violin. He was certain that it must have been George. Next morning he had come upon this violin, some leaves of music damp with dew on a music-stand, and a tall medieval candelabrum...all this was in a "ruined" pagoda at the end of the rose garden.

To the Doctor it seemed like evidence of the domestic tragedy he had feared for his friend. Perhaps George was insane? It certainly seemed disturbing that he had not gone hunting with Harry. And then, playing a violin to the owls that swooped across the starlit heavens, well, that did not seem very normal either.

The ladies were discreetly watching from an upstairs window the following morning when a rather grimy

gharry stopped in front of the Dunstaples' house in Alipore. Even Louise was watching, though she denied being in the least interested in the sort of creature that might emerge. If she happened to be standing at the window it was simply because Fanny was standing there too and she was trying to comb Fanny's hair.

"Oh dear, you mustn't let him see you or whatever will he think!" moaned Mrs Dunstaple. "Do be careful." But she herself was peering out more eagerly than anyone.

"Here he is!" cried Fanny as a rather rumpled looking young man scrambled out of the gharry and looked around in a dazed fashion. "Look how fat he is!"

"Fanny!" scolded Mrs Dunstaple, but in a halfhearted way for it was perfectly true, he did look rather fat; but his sister looked beautiful and made the ladies gasp by the simple elegance of her clothing.

If the ladies were a little disappointed by their first glimpse of Fleury, the Doctor was definitely cheered. His misgivings had increased overnight so that when Fleury turned out to be a relatively normal young man, the doctor prepared himself to take a cautiously optimistic view of his friend's son. But in no time caution gave way to outright satisfaction, and so pleased and confident did he become, so grateful that Fleury was not the effeminate individual he had been expecting, that he even began to hint to Fleury about the manly pleasures he might find in Calcutta...Young men have wild oats to sow, as he very well knew from having sown a few himself in his day...and he began to count off the pleasures of the city: the racecourse, the balls, the pretty women, the dinner parties and good fellowship and other entertainments. He himself, he hinted, forgetting that Fleury's sister was a widow, as a younger man, had spent many a happy hour in the company of vivacious young widows and suchlike.

"But no native women," he added in a lower voice. "Not even as a youngster, never touched 'em."

Taken aback to find his father's friend personified in this jovial libertine, Fleury did his best to respond but secretly wished that Miriam were there to keep the conversation on more general topics. Miriam was being received by the ladies upstairs. They were still dressing, it seemed.

The Doctor was explaining, as they strolled up and down the drawing-room, that, alas, he and his family would soon be leaving for Krishnapur...though, actually, this was more a cause of despair to the ladies than to himself, for the pig-sticking season had been under way since February and would only last till July...indeed, the best of it was already over, because soon it would become too hot to lift a finger. Besides, he had to get back to save the cantonment from the attentions of a newfangled doctor called McNab who had recently been imposed on the military cantonment at Captainganj. His face darkened a little at the thought of McNab and he began to crack his knuckles in an absentminded sort of way. "As for Louise and her prospects," he added confidentially, forgetting that Fleury had been numbered amongst them, "if she's so hard to please she can try again another year." Fleury found himself somewhat embarrassed by this information and to avoid further domestic confidences he enquired if there were many white ants in Calcutta.

"White ants?" The Doctor suffered a moment's alarm, remembering the violin and the owls. "No, I don't think so. At least, I suppose there may be, somewhere..."

"I've brought a lot of books. I just wondered whether I should take measures to protect them.'

"Oh, I see what you mean," exclaimed the Doctor with relief. "I don't think you need worry about that. In Krishnapur, perhaps, but not here." He had given himself a fright about nothing! He could hardly have been more rattled if Fleury had asked him outright for some white ants steamed in a pie! What an old fool he was becoming, to be sure.

Now at last the ladies could be heard descending and the Doctor and Fleury moved towards the door to greet them. As they did so, the Doctor's sleeve brushed a vase standing on a small table and it shattered on the floor. The ladies entered with cries of grief and alarm to find the two gentlemen picking up the pieces.

"My dear fellow," the Doctor was saying consolingly to Fleury. "Please don't apologize. It wasn't in the least your fault and, besides, it was an object of small value." And he smiled benignly at Fleury, who stared back at him in amazement. What on earth did the Doctor mean? Of course it was not his fault. How could it have been?

This accident to the vase would not have particularly mattered, Mrs Dunstaple explained rather stiffly to Fleury, if it had been theirs; unfortunately, it happened to belong to the people who had let the house to them. However, there was no point in worrying about it now.

"I'm frightfully sorry," murmured Fleury, in spite of himself. He was painfully conscious of the loveliness of Louise who had come forward to watch this regrettable scene.

"Really, Dobbin!" said Miriam crossly. "You're so clumsy. Why don't you look what you're doing?" Fleury blushed and glared at his sister; he had told her a hundred times not to call him "Dobbin". And this was the worst possible moment for her to forget, with the lovely, slightly disdainful Louise standing there. But perhaps Louise had failed to notice.

The slight feeling of awkwardness which attended Fleury's clumsiness was soon forgotten, however, in the news that Mr Hopkins, the Collector of Krishnapur, and Mrs Hopkins had just then called to pay their respects and to allow Mrs Hopkins to say farewell to her dear friends, the Dunstaples, before embarking for England. Close on the heels of this announcement came Mrs Hopkins herself, and both Fleury and Miriam were concerned to see how harrowed and grief-stricken she looked. She was already sobbing as she advanced to embrace Louise and Mrs Dunstaple.

"Carrie, dear, you must not upset yourself. I shall have to take you away if you continue." The Collector

had followed his wife into the drawing-room with such a silent tread that Fleury jumped at these words, spoken without warning at his elbow. He turned to see a man who looked like a massive cat standing beside him; a faint perfume of verbena drifted from his impressive whiskers.

Mrs Hopkins stood away weakly from Mrs Dunstaple, still weeping but attempting to dry her eyes. Ignoring the introductions that the Doctor was trying to effect, she said to Miriam: “I’m so sorry, you must forgive me...My nerves are very poor, you see, my youngest child, a boy, died just six months ago during the hot weather...ever since then I find that the least thing will upset me. He was just a baby, you see...and when we buried him all we could think of was to put a daguerrotype of his father and myself in his little arms...It was made by one of the native gentlemen and we had been meaning to send it home to England but we decided it would be better to put it in the baby’s coffin with some roses...You know, perhaps you will think me foolish but I feel just as sad to be leaving the country where his grave lies as I am to be leaving all my dearest friends...”

Fleury had the feeling that Mrs Hopkins might have continued for some time in this vein had not the Collector said rather sharply: “Caroline, you must not think about it or you’ll make yourself unwell again. I feel sure that Mrs Lang would prefer to hear of something more cheerful.”

“On the contrary, Mrs Hopkins has my deepest sympathy...and all the more so as I have myself only recently lost someone very dear to me.”

The Collector’s brows gathered up; he looked moody and displeased, but he said nothing further.

Although he generally liked sad things, such as autumn, death, ruins and unhappy love affairs, Fleury was nevertheless dismayed by the morbid turn the conversation had taken. Besides, this was the very thing that he had brought Miriam to India to avoid. But Mrs Hopkins had composed herself and Mrs Dunstaple, too, had dried her eyes, for she was easily affected by the tears of others and only the thought of making her eyes red had prevented her from shedding them as copiously as her friend. As for Louise, although she had allowed herself to be tearfully embraced, she was more self-possessed than her mother and her own eyes had not moistened.

In any case, there was no time left for crying. Large quantities of news had to be exchanged for the Dunstaples had left Krishnapur in October and a great deal had happened since then. And they wanted to know so many things...how was the Padre? and the Magistrate? and had Dr McNab despatched anyone yet? In turn Mrs Dunstaple had to explain everything which had occurred in Calcutta. She would have liked to detail the various suitors who had been attending Louise but she did not like to, in Fleury’s presence, lest he should become discouraged. Moreover, Louise tended to be bad tempered if there was open discussion of her prospects. But while Fleury and Miriam were talking to the Collector Mrs Dunstaple just had time to intimate to Mrs Hopkins that there was one prospect, a certain Lieutenant Stapleton, nephew of a General, who looked very promising indeed.

The Collector was not in a good temper. He found leave-takings harrowing at the best of times and he was concerned for his wife, who had been overtired by the long and arduous journey by *dak gharry* from Krishnapur to the rail-head; but he was also worried as to what might be happening in Krishnapur during his absence, for his presentiment of approaching disaster grew every day more powerful. In addition, he felt himself to have been ill-used just now by Miriam, who had seemed to rebuke him for lack of feeling. “She cannot know how I myself suffered for the death of the baby! And how was I to know she had lost a husband in the Crimea?” (for the Doctor had enlightened him in a whisper)...“How like a woman to take an unfair advantage like that, dragging in a dead husband to put one in the wrong!” And the Collector stroked his side-whiskers against the grain, releasing a further cloud of lemon verbena into the air. “What was that phrase of Tennyson’s? ‘...the soft and milky rabble of woman-kind...!’”

But the Collector admired pretty women and could not feel hostile to them for very long. If they were pretty he swiftly found other virtues in them which he would not have noticed had they been ugly. Soon he began to find Miriam sensible and mature, which was only to say that he liked her grey eyes and her smile. “She has a mind of her own,” he decided. “Why can’t all women be widows?”

Fleury and Miriam sat opposite the elder Dunstaples in the carriage, beside little Fanny. Their space was confined because the ladies’ crinolines ballooned against each other leaving very little room for a gentleman to stretch his legs with discretion. Even Fanny’s slender legs were lost in mounds of snowy, tiered petticoats.

“How pleasant it is to be ashore again after those five interminable months at sea! How one misses the trees, the fields, the green grass! But, of course, Miss Dunstaple, you yourself must have experienced this very same ordeal by water and here I am speaking as if I were the only person ever to have come out from England!”

Fleury had regarded this as the beginning of a pleasant conversation but somehow his words were not well received. Louise’s lips barely moved in reply and her mother looked quite put out. Had he made a blunder? It surely could not be that Louise was “country born” and had thus never been to England, a condition that he had heard was much misprised in Indian society. But alas, this seemed to be the case.

The carriage had slowed down to pass through a densely populated bazaar. Fleury gazed out at a sea of brown faces, mortified by his mistake. A few inches away two men sat cross-legged in a cupboard, one shaving the skull of the other from a cup of dirty water. A cage containing a hundred tiny trembling birds with black feathers and red beaks crept past. To Fleury India was a mixture of the exotic and the intensely

boring, which made it, because of his admiration for Chateaubriand, irresistible. Now there was shouting. They had arrived at the *ghat*.

The boat which the Doctor had engaged turned out to be a very dubious prospect indeed; a mass of leaky, rotting timbers roughly oblong in shape, manned by Dravidian cut-throats. But never mind, it was not far across the Hooghly; over the water the soaring trees of the Botanical Gardens could be seen.

"Look, there's Nigel!" cried Louise, just as they were going on board, and clapped her hands with pleasure. A scarlet uniform could be seen glimmering in and out of the white muslin of the crowd and presently a young officer on horseback with a barefoot groom running along beside him clattered up to the *ghat*. He dismounted hastily and leaving the *sais* to cope with the horse scrambled on board, saying breathlessly: "Fearfully sorry to be late!"

Mrs Dunstaple greeted him a little coldly. Evidently Louise had not told her that she intended to invite Lieutenant Stapleton and she was not altogether glad to see him. Out of the corner of his eye Fleury saw Mrs Dunstaple frowning at her daughter and nodding surreptitiously in his direction. He remembered then what the Doctor had said about Louise and her prospects. So that was it! Mrs Dunstaple was afraid lest one of these eligible young men should become discouraged by the presence of the other. Fleury was pained to see Louise glance in his direction and then toss her head and look away, as if to say: "Why should I care whether he's discouraged or not?" Although discouraged, Fleury stared at the river, pretending to admire the view. Lieutenant Stapleton, who had evidently expected to be the only young male on the expedition, seemed himself rather taken aback; when the two young men were introduced he merely mumbled wearily and eyed Fleury's crumpled but well-cut clothes with sullen envy.

No sooner had they reached the mud banks on the other side than a commotion ensued; the ladies discovered that while sitting in the boat the hems of their dresses had sopped up a certain amount of bilge water. With many moans and complaints they retired to a glade at a discreet distance with a maidservant to wring them out. When at last they returned, the party moved off, trailing a crowd of grinning servants. The gardens displayed few flowers but many enormous trees and shrubs. Their way led past the Great Banyan and Fleury was filled with awe at the sight of its many trunks joined together by branches into a series of spectacular gothic arches. He had never seen a banyan tree before.

"It's like a ruined church made by Nature!" he exclaimed with excitement as they passed by; but the Dunstaples failed to respond to this insight and, while they were all trying to decide on a suitable place for their picnic, he thought he saw Louise and Lieutenant Stapleton exchanging a sly smile.

From time to time, as they progressed through the trees, they crossed green glades where young officers were already picnicking with their ladies; but when at last they found a glade that was uninhabited Mrs Dunstaple declared it to be too sunny. In the next glade there was yet another party of young officers drinking Moselle cup with what the Doctor clearly took to be vivacious young widows. Fleury saw him look at them wistfully as he prepared to pass on with his own party...but the young officers hailed him, laughing, and asked did he not recognize them? And it turned out that they were not only acquaintances but even the best of friends, for these young men were normally stationed at Captainganj; they had been to the musketry school at Barrackpur to learn about the new Enfield rifles that were making the sepoys so cross, and had taken the opportunity of visiting Calcutta for a bit of civilization, and were naturally delighted at bumping into Dr and Mrs Dunstaple and, of course, Miss Louise, and what about that young rotter Lieutenant Harry Dunstaple who had faithfully promised to write but had not put pen to paper? They would deal with the rascal when they got back to Krishnapur in a few days...and nothing would suit them but that the Dunstaples' party should join them.

Their ladies, it turned out, were not vivacious young widows at all, but girls of the most respectable kind, the sisters of one or other of the officers; so everything was taking place with the utmost propriety.

The officers had already made several dashing assaults on their own hamper, a converted linen basket which seemed to contain nothing but Moselle cup in a variety of bottles and jars. The Dunstaples had brought several hampers, more than one of which bore the proud label of Wilson's "Hall of All Nations" (purveyors by appointment to the Rt. Honourable Viscount Canning), for the Doctor obviously believed in doing things properly. The young men could hardly restrain themselves as the Dunstaples' bearers unpacked before their eyes a real York ham, as smooth and pink as little Fanny's cheeks, oysters, pickles, mutton pies, Cheddar cheese, ox tongue, cold chickens, chocolate, candied and crystallized fruits, and biscuits of all kinds made from the finest fresh Cape flour: Abernethy's crackers, Tops and Bottoms, spice nuts and every other delicious biscuit you could imagine.

With his hands palpitating his coat tails the Doctor surveyed his bearers at work and pretended to be unaware of the young men's interest, waiting until the last moment before declaring with mock diffidence: "I'm sure you young fellows don't feel like a bite to eat, but if you do..." at which a mighty cheer rang out, causing Mrs Dunstaple to look round in case they were drawing attention to themselves, but similar gay sounds were echoing from the glades around them; only a few ragged-looking natives had made an appearance and were sitting on their heels at the edge of the clearing, gazing at the white sahibs.

The young officers, in return, insisted that everyone should share their Moselle, of which they had an over-supply; indeed, sufficient to render themselves and their ladies insensible several times over. Soon a general merriment prevailed.

As for Louise, she looked quite ethereal in the dappled sunlight and shade, but it made Fleury sad to see her surrounded by gluttony and laughter; she was holding up the thigh of a duck one end of which had been wrapped in a napkin, not to be nibbled at by herself but to be wolfed at in an exaggerated and droll manner by the heavily mustached lips and somewhat yellow teeth of one of the officers, whose name was Lieutenant Cutter and who had been one of her particular favourites the year before in Krishnapur, it seemed. And not content with having everyone helpless with laughter by this behaviour Lieutenant Cutter became more droll than ever and threw back his head to howl like a wolf between bites.

Meanwhile, the Doctor was asking Captain Hudson about something which had been on his mind for a few days: namely, what was all this about there having been trouble with the sepoys at Barrackpur in January? Had he and the other officers been there at the time?

"No, that had all quietened down by the time we got there. But it didn't amount to much in any case...one or two fires set in the native lines and some rumours spread about defilement from the new cartridges. But General Hearsey handled things pretty skilfully, even though some people thought he should have been more severe."

Here Mrs Dunstaple cried out petulantly that she wanted an explanation, because nobody ever explained to her about things like defilement and cartridges; she could remain as ignorant as a maidservant for all anyone cared, and she smiled to indicate that she was being more coquettish than cross. So Hudson kindly set himself to explain. "As you know, we load a gun by pouring a charge of powder down the barrel into the powder chamber and after that we ram a ball down on top of it. Well, the powder comes in a little paper packet which we call a cartridge...in order to get at the powder we have to tear the end off and in army drill we teach the men to do this with their teeth."

"And so the natives feel themselves defiled...well, good gracious!"

"No, not by that, Mrs Dunstaple, but by the grease on the cartridges...it's only on balled cartridges of course...that is, a cartridge with a ball in it. You empty in the powder and then instead of throwing it away you ram the rest of the cartridge in on top of it. But because it's rather a tight fit you have to grease it, otherwise the ball would get stuck. With the new Enfield rifles, which have grooves in the barrel, the balled cartridge would certainly get stuck if it wasn't greased."

"Bless my soul, so it was the grease!"

"Of course it was, that's what worried Jack Sepoy! Somehow he got the idea that the grease comes from pork or beef tallow and he didn't like it touching his lips because it's against his religion. That's why there was trouble at Barrackpur. But now Major Bontein has suggested a change of drill...in future, instead of biting off the end we'll simply tear it off. That way the sepoys won't have to worry what the grease is made of. As it is, the stuff smells disgusting enough to start an epidemic, let alone a mutiny."

Hudson added that there had been yet another spot of bother on the twenty-seventh of February, at Berhampur, a hundred miles to the north where the 19th Bengal Infantry had refused to take percussion caps on parade; the absence of any European regiment had made it impossible to deal with this mutinous act on the spot...Now the defaulting regiment was slowly being marched down to Barrackpur for disbandment. But there was no cause for alarm and, besides, now that everyone had finished eating, a game of blind man's buff was being called for.

Everyone cried that this was a splendid idea and in no time the bearers had cleared the hampers to one side (and then been cleared away themselves) and the game was ready to begin. One of the ladies, a plump girl who was already rather hot from laughing so much, had duly been blindfolded and now she was being turned round three times while everyone chanted a rhyme that one of the officers, who had decided as a pastime to study the natives, had learned from the native children:

"Attah of roses and mustard-oil,
The cat's a-crying, the pot's a-boil,
Look out and fly! The Rajah's thief
will catch you!"

With that they all darted away and the young lady blundered about shrieking with laughter until at last her brother, who was afraid that she might have hysterics, allowed himself to be caught.

This brother was none other than Lieutenant Cutter, a very amusing fellow indeed. As he lunged here and there he kept up a gruff and frightening commentary to the effect that he was a big bear and that if he caught some pretty lass he would give her a terrible hug...and the ladies were so alarmed and delighted that they could not help giving away their positions by their squeals, and they kept only just escaping in the nick of time.

But soon it became evident that there was something rather peculiar about Lieutenant Cutter's blunderings. How did it happen that far from blundering impartially as one would have expected of a blindfolded man, time and again he ignored his brother officers and made his frightening gallops in the direction of a flock of ladies? Perhaps it was simply that he could locate them by their squeals. But how was it that he so frequently galloped towards the prettiest of all, that is to say, towards Louise Dunstaple, and finally caught the poor moaning, breathless creature and gave her the terrible bear-hug he had threatened (and how was it, Fleury

wondered, that he had so plainly become animally aroused by this innocent game?) Lieutenant Cutter had been cheating, the rascal! He had somehow or other opened a little window in the folds of the silk handkerchief over his eyes and all this time he had only been simulating blindness!

And so the merriment continued. What a wonderful time everyone was having...even the ragged natives watching from the edge of the clearing were probably enjoying the spectacle...and how delightful the weather was! The Indian winter is the perfect climate, sunny and cool. It was only later that evening that Fleury remembered that he had wanted to ask Captain Hudson, who had looked an intelligent fellow, if he thought any more trouble was to be expected...Because naturally it would be foolish for himself and Miriam to visit the Dunstaples in Krishnapur, as they intended, if there was to be unrest in the country.

The Collector had been astonished, on hearing of the mutiny of the 19th at Berhampur, at the lack of alarm in official circles over this development. Later he heard that General Hearsey had been obliged to address the sepoys at Barrackpur to reassure them that there was no intention of forcibly converting them to Christianity, as they suspected. The English, Hearsey had explained to them, were “Christians of the Book”, which meant that nobody could become a Christian without first reading and understanding the Book and voluntarily choosing to become a Christian. It was believed in Calcutta, though not by the Collector, that this speech, delivered in their own language in strong, manly tones by an officer they trusted, had had a beneficial effect on the sepoys. The Collector, in the meantime, had arrived at a painful decision. In spite of his anxiety to return to Krishnapur after his wife’s departure he had decided that it was his duty to stay in Calcutta for a few more days to warn people of the danger that he himself had first perceived in those ominous chapatis he had found on his desk.

Fleury had only met the Collector on one occasion and at the time, unfortunately, he had not realized that he was meeting someone who would soon provide an interesting topic of conversation for despairing drawing-rooms. During the two years the Collector had spent in England at the beginning of the decade he had been an active member of numerous committees and societies: the Magdalen Hospital for reclaiming prostitutes, for example, and the aristocratic Mendicity Society for relieving beggars, not to mention any number of literary, zoological, antiquarian and statistical societies. That, of course, was entirely as it should be; anyone of his private means would have done the same. But Hopkins had gone further. Not only had he returned to India full of ideas about hygiene, crop rotation, and drainage, he had devoted a substantial part of his fortune to bringing out to India examples of European art and science in the belief that he was doing as once the Romans had done in Britain. Those who had seen it said that the Residency at Krishnapur was full of statues, paintings and machines. Perhaps it was only to be expected that the Collector’s efforts to bring civilization to the natives would be laughed at in Calcutta; but now here he was again, almost as entertaining, in the role of a prophet of doom.

In no time he became a familiar figure in Calcutta as he traversed the city paying calls on various dignitaries. If someone happened to see him making his way along Chowringhee he would say to himself: “There goes Hopkins. I wonder who he’s going to warn this time.” The Collector’s foretelling of the wrath to come, based largely, people said, on his actually having *eaten* the chapatis he had found soon became a great source of amusement. Fleury, among others, followed his progress with amazement and relish. It even became something of a vogue in Government circles to be called on by the Collector and more than one host entertained his dinner guests with an account of how the Collector had buttonholed somebody or other to predict disaster. And when he visited you he would launch into a confused harangue about the need for civilization to be brought nearer to the native, or something like that, mixed up with gloomy predictions as usual. But as the days went by and people continued to see him driving here or there in Calcutta or stalking with lonely dignity across the no longer very green expanse of the *maidan* or even standing deep in thought beside the river at about the place where the great Howrah Bridge looms today, there came a time when they scarcely noticed him any more.

Gradually, as the weather grew hotter and the list of dignitaries whom he evidently believed it unwise not to warn grew no shorter, the Collector began to take on a frayed appearance, even though his shirt remained as white and his morning coat as carefully pressed. Then, in April, another story about the Collector went the rounds, though where it originated was a mystery. It was said that although he was still to be seen criss-crossing the city, he was no longer paying calls on anyone. During those first few days after his wife’s departure everyone Fleury came across, if they had not been visited themselves, at least had a friend, or a friend of a friend, whom the Collector had visited “to draw his attention to the grave state of unrest in which the native finds himself”. But now, if you asked in any of the drawing-rooms you frequented, there would be plenty of people who had seen the Collector on the road but nobody would have heard of him having reached a destination.

Moreover, now that the sun was scorching hot during the middle of the day the Collector was frequently to be seen (you would have seen him yourself if you had been out and about in Calcutta at that time) standing at the roadside in the shade of a tree, he would be standing there lost in thought (thinking, people chuckled, of a way to get a new civilization to advance with the railways into the Mofussil to soothe the natives) like a man waiting for the end of a shower, though, of course, there was not a cloud in sight. But whatever the reason for

these long pauses under trees they certainly fostered the belief that the Collector had given up paying warning visits to people. But why, in that case, he should not simply have remained at home, no one could explain.

Of course, there was another explanation that nobody suggested. Now that it was no longer considered to be the height of fashion to be called on and warned by the Collector (indeed, it was thought to be rather ridiculous, for if he had waited this long before coming you were clearly not very high on his list of influential people) a number of those he visited were no doubt declining to see him on the grounds that they were too busy.

And then, one day, quite suddenly, he had disappeared. Evidently he had decided to leave Calcutta to its ignorance and had returned to Krishnapur to take up his duties. For a time nothing more was heard of him.

The cemetery where Fleury's mother was buried is still to be seen in Calcutta, in Park Street, a short distance from the *maidan*. Nowadays it is an astonishing and lonely place, untended and overgrown. Many of the more ambitious Victorian tombs tilt unevenly, others have collapsed or have been deliberately smashed. Very often, too, the lead letters have been picked out of the inscriptions, a small tax imposed by the living on the dead. Near the gate a couple of destitute families huddle uneasily in huts they have built of sticks and rags; no wonder they are so ill at ease, for even to a Christian the atmosphere here is ominous.

In Fleury's day, however, the grass was cut and the graves well cared for. Besides, as you might expect, he was fond of graveyards; he enjoyed brooding in them and letting his heart respond to the abbreviated biographies he found engraved in their stones...so eloquent, so succinct! All the same, once he had spent an hour or two pondering by his mother's grave he decided to call it a day because, after all, one does not want to overdo the lurking in graveyards.

This decision was not a very sudden one. From the age of sixteen when he had first become interested in books, much to the distress of his father, he had paid little heed to physical and sporting matters. He had been of a melancholy and listless cast of mind, the victim of the beauty and sadness of the universe. In the course of the last two or three years, however, he had noticed that his sombre and tubercular manner was no longer having quite the effect it had once had, particularly on young ladies. They no longer found his pallor so interesting, they tended to become impatient with his melancholy. The effect, or lack of it, that you have on the opposite sex is important because it tells you whether or not you are in touch with the spirit of the times, of which the opposite sex is invariably the custodian. The truth was that the tide of sensitivity to beauty, of gentleness and melancholy, had gradually ebbed leaving Fleury floundering on a sandbank. Young ladies these days were more interested in the qualities of Tennyson's "great, broad-shouldered, genial Englishman" than they were in pallid poets, as Fleury was dimly beginning to perceive. Louise Dunstaple's preference for romping with jolly officers which had dismayed him on the day of the picnic had by no means been the first rebuff of this kind. Even Miriam sometimes asked him aloud why he was looking "hangdog" when once she would have remained silent, thinking "soulful".

All the same, one cannot change one's character overnight simply to suit the fashion, even if one wants to. Some obstinate people in Fleury's predicament prefer to retain the one they started with, and are content to regard their own era as philistine, or effeminate, or whatever it is that they themselves are not. It only becomes a real problem if you fall in love like Fleury and want to seem attractive.

For a day or two Fleury became quite active. He had his book about the advance of civilization in India to consider and this was one reason why he had taken an interest in the behaviour of the Collector. He asked a great number of questions and even bought a notebook to record pertinent information.

"Why, if the Indian people are happier under our rule," he asked a Treasury official, "do they not emigrate from those native states like Hyderabad which are so dreadfully misgoverned and come and live in British India?"

"The apathy of the native is well known," replied the official stiffly. "He is not enterprising." Fleury wrote down "apathy" in a flowery hand and then, after a moment's hesitation, added "not enterprising". Unfortunately, this burst of energy did not survive the leaden facts which he was given to illustrate the Company's beneficial effect. When told of the spectacular increases in Customs, Opium and Salt revenues he fell into a stupor and not long after was to be seen stretched listlessly on a sofa once more, deep in a book of poems.

Dr Dunstaple had been prevailed upon by Louise and by Mrs Dunstaple to let them delay their departure for Krishnapur until the last ball of the cold season had been held. Louise could then be bridesmaid at the wedding of a friend that very same evening in St Paul's Cathedral. The Doctor sighed. Another few lucky pigs had escaped his spear. He was not fond of dancing.

In the town hall the temperature was well over ninety degrees, the high windows stood open, and punkahs flapped like wounded birds above the dancers. Although Fleury could not imagine how one could dance in such a heat Louise had filled her card in no time at all; by the time he came to make an application to his dismay there remained nothing but the *galloppe*. He passed the back of his hand across his brow and it came away glistening, as if brushed with olive oil. Nor could the ladies look cool; no amount of rice powder could dull the glint of their features, no amount of padding could prevent damp stains from spreading at their armpits.

Pointing out one marvel after another, the musicians, the magnificently liveried servants, the delightful buffet amid the flowers and chandeliers and potted palms, the Doctor strongly recommended Fleury not to ignore this elegant scene when it came to choosing examples of civilized behaviour for his book. This was civilization of a sort, it was true, agreed Fleury, but somehow he believed that what was required was a completely different aspect of it...its spiritual, its mystical side, the side of the heart! "Civilization as it is now denatures man. Think of the mills and the furnaces...Besides, Doctor, everyone I talk to in Calcutta about my book tells me to look at this or that...a canal that has been dug, or some cruel practice like infanticide or suttee which has been stopped...And these are certainly improvements of course, but they are only symptoms, as it were, of what should be a great, beneficial disease...The trouble is, you see, that although the symptoms are there, the disease itself is missing!"

"A beneficial disease!" thought the Doctor, glancing with dismay at Fleury's flushed countenance.

"Hm, that's all very well but...Here, have one of these." The Doctor proffered Fleury his cigar-case, adding, by way of a subtle compliment: "I'm afraid they're not as good as Lord Canning's though." He watched Fleury anxiously. He had heard, though it might be only a rumour, that Fleury had cornered some poor devil in the Bengal Club and read him a long poem about some people climbing a symbolical mountain.

Perplexed by this reference to Lord Canning, Fleury took a cigar and ran his nose along it thoughtfully. His eye came to rest on two lovely, perspiring girls nearby as one of them exclaimed: "I hate men who hop in the polka!" At any London ball he might have over-heard the same remark. Moreover, he had heard that wealthy Indian gentlemen also gave balls in Calcutta in the civilized European manner, even though at the same time they despised English ladies for dancing with men as if they were ' *nautch*' girls, something they would certainly never have permitted to their own wives. There seemed to be a contradiction in this. It was all very difficult.

The Doctor had taken Fleury by the elbow and was guiding him towards the buffet. And where was Mrs Lang this evening? Fleury explained that Miriam had refused to come with him, not because she was still in mourning but because she considered it too hot to dance. Miriam had a mind of her own, he grumbled.

"What a sensible young woman!" cried the Doctor enviously, wishing that his own ladies had minds of their own which told them when it was too hot to dance.

They passed a row of flushed chaperones alongside the floor; the incessant movement of fans gave a fluttering effect to these ladies, as of birds preening themselves. Their eyes, starting out of the pallor of heavily powdered faces, followed Fleury expressionlessly as he strolled by; he thought: "How true that English ladies do not prosper in the Indian climate! The flesh subsides and melts away, leaving only strings and fibres and wrinkles."

Now there was a stir in the ballroom as the word went round: General Hearsey had arrived! The throng at the edge of the floor was so great that the Doctor and Fleury could see nothing, so they mounted a few steps of the white marble staircase. There they managed to catch a glimpse of the General and the Doctor could not help glancing at Fleury and wishing that his son Harry was there in his stead. Harry would have given anything to set eyes on the brave General whereas Fleury, his brain poached by theories about civilization, could surely not appreciate the worth of the man now making his slow way through the guests, many of whom came forward to greet him; others who had not made his acquaintance rose out of respect and bowed as he passed.

But the Doctor was doing Fleury an injustice for Fleury was no less stirred than he was himself. Fleury suspected himself of being a coward and here he was in the presence of the man who, in front of a sepoy quarter guard trembling on the brink of revolt, had ridden fearlessly up to the rebel who had just shot the adjutant. To the warning of a fellow officer that his musket was loaded the General had replied in words already famous all over Calcutta: "Damn his musket!" And the sepoy, overpowered by the General's moral presence, had been unable to squeeze the trigger. No wonder that, for the moment, Fleury had forgotten about his theories and was feasting his eyes on the elderly soldier below, on the General's thick white hair and mustache, on the manly bearing that made you forget he was sixty-six years old. And as the General, who was talking calmly to some friend, but whose face nevertheless wore a tired and strained look, lifted his eyes and rested them on Fleury for a moment, Fleury's heart thudded as if he had been a hussar instead of a poet.

Refreshed by this glimpse of courage personified Fleury and the Doctor continued up the marble staircase to the galleries. Here a number of people were comfortably seated in alcoves, separated from each other by ferns and red plush screens, in a good position to survey the floor below. There was a good deal of coming and going between these alcoves as social calls were paid and it was here that one might discuss the hard facts of marriage while the young people took care of the sentimental aspects downstairs. Mrs Dunstaple had found herself a sofa beneath a punkah and was talking to another lady who also had a nubile daughter, though rather more plain than Louise. At the sight of Fleury approaching with her husband Mrs Dunstaple was unable to stifle a groan of pleasure for she had just been boasting to her companion of the attentions which Fleury was paying to Louise and had had the disagreeable impression of not being altogether believed.

Fleury bowed as he was introduced and then sat down, dazed by the heat. The red plush screens surrounding him gave him the feeling that he was sitting in a furnace. He took out a handkerchief and mopped his oily brow. On the floor below, the dancers were coming to the end of a waltz and soon it would be time for the *galloppe*. Presently Louise appeared, escorted by Lieutenants Cutter and Stapleton who both

stared insolently at Fleury and evidently found themselves unequal to the task of recognizing him.

Fleury gazed in admiration at Louise; he understood she had been a bridesmaid at the wedding of a childhood friend earlier in the evening. The two girls had grown up together and now, after they had told each other so many times: “Oh no, you’ll be first!”, the other girl *had* been first, because Louise was taking such a long time making up her mind.

Fleury could see that Louise had been moved by this experience of being her friend’s bridesmaid; her face had become vulnerable, as if she were close to laughter or tears. He found this vulnerability strangely disarming.

And now that Louise had been keyed up in this way, small wonder if for a few hours at least, she should look at every young man she met, even Fleury, and see him momentarily as her future husband. Mrs Dunstaple looked at her daughter and then looked at Fleury, who was covertly grinding his teeth and scratching his knuckles, which had just been bitten by a mosquito. How quickly life goes by! She sighed. The rather plain daughter of her companion was suffering from “prickly heat”, she was being informed. What a shame! She bent a sympathetic ear.

It was time for the *galloppe*. As they took up their positions on the floor Louise raised her eyes and gazed at Fleury in an enquiring sort of way. But Fleury was wool-gathering, he was thinking complacently that in London one would not still have seen gentlemen wearing brown evening dress coats as one did here, and he was thinking of civilization, of how it must be something more than the fashions and customs of one country imported into another, of how it must be *a superior view of mankind*, and of how he was suffocated in his own black evening dress coat, and of what a strong smell of sweat there was down here on the floor, and of whether he could possibly survive the coming dance. Then, at last, the orchestra struck up with a lively air and set the dancers’ feet in motion, among them Louise’s white satin shoes and Fleury’s patent leather boots, charging and wheeling rhythmically as if all this were taking place not in India but in some temperate land far away.

3

Towards the end of April the *dak gharry* which carried the English mail inland every fortnight made its laborious way as usual across the vast plain towards Krishnapur. It dragged behind it a curtain of dust which climbed to an immense height and hung in the air for several miles back like a rain cloud. As well as the mail the *gharry* also contained Miriam, Fleury, Lieutenant Harry Dunstaple, and a spaniel called Chloë, who had spent a good deal of the journey with her head out of the window watching with amazement the dust that billowed from beneath the wheels.

“What I should like to know, Harry, is whether it’s a Moslem or a Hindu cemetery?”

“The Hindus don’t bury their dead so it must be Mohammedan.”

“Of course it must, what a fool I am!” Fleury glanced at Harry for the signs of derision that newcomers to India, insultingly termed “griffins”, had to expect from old hands. But Harry’s pleasant face registered only polite lack of interest in the burial habits of the natives.

Fleury and Miriam had come across Harry at the last *dak* bungalow; he had very decently ridden out to greet them, in spite of the fact that his left arm was in a sling; he had sprained his wrist pig-sticking. Not content with riding out he had sent his horse back with the *sais* and had joined the travellers in the discomfort of the *gharry*, a carriage which bore a close resemblance to an oblong wooden box on four wheels without springs; they had now spent almost two days in this conveyance and their soft bodies cried out for comfort. Miriam had spent most of the journey with her nose buried in a handkerchief and her eyes leaking muddy tears, not because she had suffered a renewal of grief for Captain Lang but because of the stifling dust which irritated her eyeballs. As for Fleury, his excitement at the prospect of seeing Louise again was muted by misgivings as to what sort of place Krishnapur might turn out to be. This arid plain they were crossing was scarcely promising. Very likely there would be discomfort and snakes. In such circumstances he feared that he would not shine.

Harry had greeted him with friendliness mixed with caution and they had spent a little time searching hopefully, but so far in vain, for an interest in common. The Joint Magistrate had been taken ill and had gone to the hills for a cure from which it was feared he would not return, Harry had explained, so it had been arranged that they should take over his bungalow while he was away.

Chloë, overcome by the heat, had thrown herself panting on to Fleury’s lap and had fallen asleep there. He tried to shove her away, but a dog that does not want to be moved can make herself very heavy indeed, and so he was obliged to let her stay. Fleury did not himself particularly care for dogs, but he knew that young ladies did, as a rule. He had bought Chloë, whose golden tresses had reminded him of Louise, from a young officer who had ruined himself at the race-course. At the time he had thought of Chloë as a subtle gift; the golden tresses had blended in his mind with the idea of canine fidelity and devotion. He would use Chloë as a first salvo aimed at Louise’s affections. But in the meantime he found her only a nuisance.

As they approached Krishnapur they saw a few travellers on the road, including some sepoys who looked very fine in their red coats and black trousers. As they passed, the sepoys saluted the pallor of the faces they

glimpsed in the dim interior of the carriage (not to mention Chloë's gilt curls). Only Harry noticed with a frown that one or two of them had saluted with their left hands; if he had been alone he would have stopped and rebuked them for such a deliberate lack of respect; as it was he had to pretend not to have noticed. They crept ponderously past a camel harnessed to a cart and Fleury stared dubiously at the belt around the great balloon of its stomach...all these strange sights made him feel melancholy again, a lone wanderer on the face of the earth. Old men sat on their heels against the wall of a nabob's house and beside them sat a dusty lion chained to the wall. Next they passed a mosque, empty except for lamps of coloured glass, and rattled over an iron bridge. A family of yellow-green monkeys stared up at him with hostility, their eyes like lumps of polished jade.

And then they had plunged into the bazaar, crowded with people dressed in white muslin. Where could they all possibly live? An incongruous picture came into Fleury's mind of a hundred and fifty people squatting on the floor of his aunt's drawing-room in Torquay. The *gharry* lurched suddenly and turned into some gates. They had arrived. His heart sank.

They had not arrived. Harry had climbed down and was arguing with a man who had been scrambling along beside the carriage shouting and had caused them to turn into these gates which, it turned out, belonged to the *dak* bungalow. Harry seemed quite angry; this was not at all where he wanted to stop. A laborious parley was taking place, Harry's grasp of the language being limited to a few simple commands, domestic and military. He was becoming exasperated and beginning to shout; soldiers are notorious for reacting badly when their will is opposed. Yet though the man flinched slightly at every fresh outburst, he stood his ground. They might have continued like this for some time, Harry shouting, the native flinching, but for the appearance of another man, elderly and very fat, who hurried up from the direction of the bungalow. When he opened his mouth to speak, Fleury saw that it was stained an astonishing orange-red from the chewing of betel. Hypnotized he stared into this glowing cavern from which English was emerging, though not of a sort he was able to understand. This man was the *khansamah* from the *dak* bungalow, Harry interpreted for Fleury's benefit, and what he wanted to say was...wait!

A look of alarm appeared on Harry's face and without waiting to hear any more he sprinted towards the bungalow, up the steps, and vanished inside. Fleury would have followed had not Chloë chosen this moment to wrench herself from his grip and bolt into the enticing green jungle of the compound. Ignoring his shouts she careered away at high speed with her nose to the ground. He pursued her despairingly and after a long search found her experimentally licking the brown stomach of a baby she had come across playing in the mud by the servants' huts some distance away. He dragged her back, slapping and scolding. Harry had returned.

"What was all that about?"

"I thought you heard. The *khansamah* said a woman was trying to kill herself." Harry paused, looking shaken. "She appears to be...well, I suppose one would say 'drunk', not to put too fine a point on it."

"A Hindu?" ventured Fleury with medium confidence. He had remembered that Mohammedans do not drink.

"Well, that's the whole thing. She appears to be English, I'm afraid. That is, I mean to say, she definitely *is* English. I'd heard something about her before, actually. It seems..." Harry cleared his throat artificially. His already pink cheeks grew pinker and he threw an embarrassed glance in the direction of Miriam. "It seems some officer took away her virtue. He left her then, of course, or he'd have got into trouble with his colonel. She's done this before, you know. I mean, tried to kill herself. One really doesn't know quite what to do."

The sun was setting by the time Fleury and Miriam found their way to the Joint Magistrate's bungalow. It turned out to be a yellow-plastered building surrounded by a verandah and thatched for coolness. Bearers appeared out of the twilight to wrestle with their boxes while they peered inside. Two bedrooms, each with a bathroom attached, and two other rooms, divided from each other by pieces of red cotton cloth instead of doors. Saying she was tired, Miriam swiftly vanished into the emptiest bedroom with her boxes, leaving Fleury to his own devices. Fleury felt resentful towards her for so suddenly deserting him in this unfamiliar place; she had become like this since the death of her husband.

Melancholy overwhelmed him at the thought of the lonely evening ahead. Although the Joint Magistrate had gone away to die in the hills he had not seen fit to take his belongings with him. One of the rooms had been used as an office; paper was heaped everywhere. Fleury stirred a pile of documents with the toe of his boot and it toppled over gently on to the floor, exhaling dust; the light was just bright enough for him to see that it was a collection of salt-reports tied in bundles with the frail, faded red tape of India's official business. There were also blue-books, codes, and countless letters, some filed, some heaped at random. It seemed inevitable that no one would ever return from the hills to sort out this mass of official paper. From the wall the head of a very small tiger stared at him with dislike; at least, he supposed it must be a tiger, though it looked more like an ordinary household cat.

By now most of the baggage had been moved into his bedroom and was being unpacked under the eye of the *khansamah*, who in turn was being supervised by Harry, who had helpfully reappeared, bringing with him an invitation to supper at the Residency. Gradually the contents of his boxes were emptied out: books and clothes, Havanas, Brown Windsor soap, jams and conserves in miraculously unbroken jars, a cask of brandy, seidlitz powders, candles, a tin footbath, bound volumes of Bell's Life, more candles, boots in trees, and an ingenious piece of furniture designed to serve, in dire domestic situations which Fleury hoped never to

experience, as both wash-stand and writing table. After a rapid discussion in Hindustani the books were placed on top of this table and its legs were stood in earthenware saucers filled with water. It was to protect them against ants, Harry explained. Fleury nodded calmly but a terrible thought occurred to him: what if snakes came to drink from these saucers while he was asleep in bed? Something warned him, however, not to mention this fear to Harry. Harry would not understand. Then, peering around in the gathering darkness, Fleury noticed that not only the legs of the table but also of the cupboards and even of the bed itself were standing in saucers brimming with water.

By the time Fleury reached the Residency it was much too dark for him to see the apoplectic snap-dragons that guarded the beds beside the drive, but he could smell the heavy scent of the roses...the smell disturbed him; like the smell of incense it was more powerful than an Englishman is accustomed to. At that moment, tired and dispirited, he would have given a great deal to smell the fresh breeze off the Sussex downs. He said as much to Harry Dunstaple.

"Yes, I see what you mean," agreed Harry cautiously.

"I say, what's all this?"

Two looming banks of earth had rolled out of the darkness to engulf them like a tidal wave as they approached the gates.

"Drains," said Harry stiffly.

"Drains!"

"Well, actually, they're not really drains. They're fortifications in case the Residency has to be defended. It's the Collector's idea, you know." Harry's tone was disapproving. The military at Captainganj took a dim view of the Collector's earthworks, a view which Harry shared. Some people, Harry knew, would have put it more bluntly and said that the Collector had gone mad. Everybody at Captainganj believed that there was no danger at all, of course, but that what danger there *was*, would be maximized by the Collector's display of trepidation. All the same, the Collector wielded the supreme authority in Krishnapur, an authority even higher than that of General Jackson. The General could do what he liked at Captainganj but that was the limit of his estate; his authority was cushioned all around by that of the Collector whose empire ran to the horizon in every direction. In Harry's view, the Collector's authority resembled in many ways that of a Roman emperor; however fallible a Collector might be as a human being, as a representative of the Company he commanded respect. It was in the nature of things that sometimes a Roman emperor, or a Collector, would go mad, insist on promoting his horse to be a general, and would have to be humoured; such a danger exists in every rigid hierarchy. But the feeling at Captainganj was that it could not have happened at a worse time; the military were being made to look ridiculous. Word of the Collector's behaviour in Calcutta had already come back to the barracks, together with mocking comments from brother officers at other stations. Nobody likes ridicule, even when undeserved, but to a soldier it is like a bed of fiery coals. The Residency was not their province, but people would think, or pretend to think, that it was; people would say they were "croaking"! The Collector's timorous behaviour would rub off on *them*.

And yet, although Harry thought all this, he could not bring himself to say it...at least, not to Fleury; in private with a brother officer, perhaps, he might allow himself to rant against the Collector, but with a stranger, even one who was almost a cousin, it would have offended his sense of honour. So the most he could permit himself about the drains was a tone of disapproval...but in any case, by now they had left them behind and their boots were clattering on the steps of the portico.

The Residency was lamplit at this time of night. The marble staircase which faced Fleury as he entered gave him the delicious sensation of entering a familiar and civilized house; his eyes, which had been starved of such nourishment since he had left Calcutta, greedily followed the swerve of its bannister until it curled into itself like a ram's horn at the bottom. Other Europeans besides Fleury had feasted their eyes on this staircase; in Calcutta one might not have noticed it particularly, but here in the Krishnapur cantonment all the other houses were of one storey; to be able to go upstairs was a luxury available only to the Collector and his guests. Indeed, the only other dwelling in the neighbourhood which could boast a staircase was the palace of the Maharajah of Krishnapur; not that this was much use to the English community, because, although he had a fine son who had been educated in Calcutta by English tutors, the old Maharajah himself was eccentric, libidinous, and spoke no English.

Two chandeliers hung over the long walnut dining table and their rainbow glints were reflected in its polished surface. Fleury's spirits had been instantly restored, thanks partly to the civilized atmosphere of the Residency, partly to the Collector's "drains" which had reminded him what an entertaining character his host was. He began to look around eagerly for further signs of eccentricity. At the same time he tried to sort out the names of all the people he had just been introduced to. He had been greeted warmly by Dr and Mrs Dunstaple, and inaudibly by Louise who was now standing a little way back from the table, fair and pale, her long golden curls flowing out like a bow-wave from the parting on top of her head, slender fingers resting absently on...well, on what looked like a machine of some kind. "Hello, what have we here?" Fleury crowed inwardly. "A machine in the dining-room, how deuced peculiar!" He peered at it more closely, causing Louise to release it from her tender fingers and drift away, ignoring him. It was a rectangular metal box with a funnel at one end and cog-wheels on both sides. A faint fragrance of lemon verbena stole up behind him. He turned to find the Collector watching him moodily.

“It’s a gorse bruiser,” he declared heavily, before Fleury had a chance to enquire. “What’s it for? It’s to enable gorse to be fed to cattle. The idea is to soften the hard points of the prickles where the nutritive juices are contained. They say that once gorse has been passed through this machine any herbivore will eat it with avidity.”

Fleury surveyed the engine with a polite and studious expression, aware that the Collector was watching him.

“Ah, now here’s the Padre to say Grace.”

No sooner had the meal begun than conversation of the most civilized sort began to flow around the table. Fleury appeared to join in this conversation: he nodded sagely, frowned, smiled, and stroked his chin thoughtfully at intervals, but he was so hungry that his mind could think of nothing but the dishes which followed each other over the table...the fried fish in batter that glowed like barley sugar, the curried fowl seasoned with lime juice, coriander, cumin and garlic, the tender roast kid and mint sauce. As these dishes were placed before him, occasional disjointed snatches of conversation loomed up at him through the fog of his gluttony, stared at him like strangers, and vanished again.

“ *Humani generis progressus*...I quote the official catalogue of the Exhibition,” came the Collector’s voice eerily. “But I fear I must translate, Doctor, for this son of yours who has paid more attention to guns and horses than to his books...'The progress of the human race, resulting from the labour of all men, ought to be the final object of the exertion of each individual.”'

But Fleury’s base nature whispered that there are times when a man must let the world’s problems take care of themselves for a while until, refreshed, he is ready to spring into action again and deal with them. And so he ate on relentlessly.

Only when pudding, in the shape of a cool and creamy mango fool, was placed before him did the fumes of gluttony begin to clear from Fleury’s brain and permit him to hear what was being said about “progress”. This was not a topic to interest everyone, however. Harry, for instance, had hardly said a word; like his father at the other end of the table he was clearly not much of a one for abstract conversations. Poor Harry, it had probably never occurred to him that one could make an “adventurous” remark (as he, Fleury, frequently did) or have an “exciting” conversation. He looked rather pale at the moment, no doubt his sprained wrist was troubling him; he should probably not have ridden out to the *dak* bungalow to get that jolting on the way back.

Louise, too, remained silent. In Fleury’s view she was quite right to sit there quietly and listen to what the gentlemen had to say, because speaking a great deal in company is not an attractive quality in a young lady. A young lady with strong opinions is even worse. What can be more distressing than to hear a member of the fair sex exclaiming: “In the first place, this...and in the second place, that...” while she chops the air with her fingers and divides whatever you have just been saying into categories? No, a woman’s special skill is to listen quietly to what a fellow has to say and thereby create the sort of atmosphere in which good conversation can flourish. So thought Fleury, anyway.

Mrs Hampton, the Padre’s wife, did occasionally venture an opinion, as her rank and maturity entitled her to...but she took advantage of her privilege only to support the views of her husband, which no one could object to. Of the other ladies two were remarkably garrulous, or would have been had they not been overawed by Mrs Hampton who kept them severely in check, cutting in firmly each time one of them tried to launch into a silly discourse. One of them, a pretty though rather vulgar person, was Mrs Rayne, the wife of the Opium Agent; the other, even more talkative, was her friend and companion, recently widowed, Mrs Ross.

Now that he had eaten, Fleury was merely waiting for a break in the conversation before voicing his own opinion on progress. It came almost immediately. “If there has been any progress in our century,” he declared with confidence, “it has been less in material than in spiritual matters. Think of the progress from the cynicism and materialism of our grandparents...from a Gibbon to a Keats, from a Voltaire to a Lamartine!”

“I disagree,” replied Mr Rayne with a smile. “It’s only in practical matters that one may look for signs of progress. Ideas are always changing, certainly, but who’s to say that one is better than another? It is in material things that progress can be clearly seen. I hope you’ll forgive me if I mention opium but really one has to go no farther to find progress exemplified. Opium, even more than salt, is a great source of revenue of our own creation and is now more productive than any except the land revenue. And who pays it? Why, John Chinaman...who prefers our opium to any other. That’s what I call progress.”

The Collector had been behaving oddly; moody and expansive by turns, perhaps on account of tiredness or of the claret he had drunk, he now suddenly became expansive again. “My dear friends, there’s no question at all of a division of importance between the spiritual and the practical. It is the one that imbues the other with purpose...It’s the other that provides an indispensable instrument for the one! Mr Rayne, you are perfectly right to mention this increase of revenue from opium but consider for a moment...what is it all *for* ? It’s not simply to acquire wealth, but to acquire *through* wealth, that superior way of life which we loosely term civilization and which includes so many things, both spiritual and practical...and of the utmost diversity...a system of administering justice impartially on the one hand, works of art unsurpassed in beauty since antique times on the other. The spreading of the Gospel on the one hand, the spreading of the railways on the other.

And yet where shall be placed such a phenomenon as the gigantic iron steamship, the *Great Eastern*, which our revered compatriot, Mr Brunel, is at this moment building, and which is soon to subdue the seven seas of the world? For is this not at once a prodigious material triumph and an embodiment, by God's grace, of the spirit of mankind? Mr Rayne, both the poet and the Opium Agent are necessary to our scheme of things. What d'you say, Padre? Am I right?"

Although lightly built, the Reverend Hampton had been a rowing man at Oxford and he retained from those days a healthy and unassuming manner, illuminated by an earnest simplicity of faith which shone through his every word and gesture. In the seething religious atmosphere of Oxford in the Padre's time a man did well to stick to rowing; the Tractarian onslaughts were enough to shake the strongest constitution; it was said that in Oxford even Dr Whateley, now the Archbishop of Dublin, had preached a sermon with one leg dangling out of the pulpit. All the same, the Padre sometimes had a worried look; this was because he was afraid that the duties to which the Lord had called him might prove too much for his strength.

"Mr Hopkins, as you know, I had the privilege like yourself of attending the Great Exhibition which opened in our homeland six years ago almost to this very day. To wander about in that vast building of glass, so immense that the elms it enclosed looked like Christmas trees, was to walk in a wonderland of beauty and of Man's ingenuity...But of all the many marvels it contained there was one in the American section which made a particular impression on me because it seemed to combine so happily both the spiritual and the practical. I am referring to the Floating Church for Seamen from Philadelphia. This unusual construction floated on the twin hulls of two New York clipper ships and was entirely in the Gothic style, with a tower surmounted by a spire...inside, it contained a bishop's chair; outside, it was painted to resemble brown stone. As I looked at it I thought of all the churches built by men throughout the ages and said to myself: 'There has surely never been a more consummate embodiment of Faith than this.'"

"A splendid example," agreed the Collector. "A very happy marriage of fact and spirit, of deed and ghost."

"But no, sir! But no, Padre!" cried Fleury, so vehemently as to startle awake those guests whose minds had wandered during the preceding discussion. All eyes turned towards him and even as he spoke he wondered whether he might not be ever so slightly drunk. "But no, with all respect, that's not it at all! Please consider, Padre, that a church is no more a church because it floats! Would a church be any more of a church if we could hoist it into the skies with a thousand balloons? Only the person capable of listening to the tenderest echoes of his own heart is capable of making that aerial ascent which will unite him with the Eternal. As for your most brilliant engineers, if they don't listen to the voice of their hearts, not a thousand, not a million balloons will be capable of lifting their leaden feet one inch from the earth..." Fleury paused, catching sight of the consternation on the Doctor's face. He did not dare glance at Louise. Somehow he knew she would be displeased. He could have kicked himself now for having blurted out all that about "the tenderest echoes of the heart"...that was the very last line to take with a girl like Louise who enjoyed flirting with officers. He had *meant* to say none of that...he had meant to be blunt and manly and to smile a lot. What a fool he was! As he sat there a random, frightening thought occurred to him: tonight he would have to sleep in the midst of sipping snakes!

Meanwhile, the Padre was looking distinctly alarmed. This young man had started a theological hare which might prove difficult to seize if he let it get away. He thought back grimly to his undergraduate days where this sort of theological beagling had been very fashionable and had ended, alas, in more than one young man taking a fall and losing his Faith. And the Padre was already beset by worries enough; apart from the manifold problems of ministry in a heathen country, scarcely two hours had passed since he had had a painful interview with the fallen woman in the *dak* bungalow, and he had found her still so intoxicated as to be unavailable to the voice of her conscience. But he had an even greater worry than that, for with the English mail that had arrived in the *dak gharry* that very evening had come a copy of the *Illustrated London News* with a strong editorial against a danger of which he had not even been aware...a projected new translation of the Bible. It had not taken the editorial to make him realize the extent of this danger looming over the Christian world. The Bible was sacred and the Padre knew that one cannot change something that is sacred. Men were preparing to improve upon sacred words! In their folly and their pride they were setting themselves to edit the Divine Author.

Yet at the same time he could not understand why the Bible should have had to be translated at all, even in the first place...why it should have been written in Hebrew and Greek when English was the obvious language, for outside one remote corner of the world hardly anyone could understand Hebrew, whereas English was spoken in every corner of every continent. The Almighty had, it was true, subsequently permitted a magnificent translation, as if realizing His error...but, of course, the Almighty could not be in error, such an idea was an absurdity. Here the Padre was aware of intruding on matters of extraordinary theological complexity which blinded his brain. It was so hot and one must not allow oneself to get caught like a ram in a thicket of sophistry. He made an effort to rally himself and said, mildly but firmly: "I agree, Mr Fleury, that a church is a house of God whatever its design. With the Floating Church I was citing an instance of men dedicating ingenuity of the highest rank to God."

Poor Fleury, he had rashly advanced too far into the swamp of disputation. His pride was at stake and he could no longer retrace his steps. He could only go forward even though each sucking footstep he took must inevitably increase Louise's contempt.

“But I think that to dedicate is not enough. We calculate, we make deductions, we observe, we construct when we should *feel* ! We do these things instead of feeling.”

Harry Dunstaple stirred uncomfortably in his seat, looking paler than ever; he could not for the life of him see the point of so much talk about nothing.

The Collector’s stern features had set into an expression of good-humoured impatience; while Fleury had been speaking he had sent one of the bearers to fetch something and presently he returned carrying three bound volumes. “This Universe of ours functions according to laws which in our humble ignorance we are scarcely able to perceive, let alone understand. But if the divine benevolence allows us to explore some few of its marvels it is clearly right that we should do so. No, Mr Fleury, every invention is a prayer to God. Every invention, however great, however small, is a humble emulation of the greatest invention of all, the Universe. Let me just quote at random from this catalogue of the Exhibition to which the Padre referred a moment ago, that Exhibition which I beg you to consider as a collective prayer of all the civilized nations...Let me see, Number 382: Instrument to teach the blind to write. Model of an aerial machine and of a navigable balloon. A fire annihilator by R. Weare of Plumstead Common. A domestic telegraph requiring only one bell for any number of rooms. An expanding pianoforte for yachts etc. Artificial teeth carved in hippopotamus ivory by Sinclair and Hockley of Soho. A universal drill for removing decay from teeth. A jaw-lever for keeping animals’ mouths open. Improved double truss for hernia, invented by a labouring man...There seems to be no end to the ingenuity of mankind and I could continue indefinitely quoting examples of it. But I ask you only to consider these humble artefacts of man’s God-given ability to observe and calculate as minute steps in the progress of mankind towards union with that Supreme Being in whom all knowledge *is*, and ever shall be.”

“Amen,” murmured the Padre automatically. But had a still, small voice just tried to whisper to him?

The Collector had spoken in a voice of authority which closed the discussion. For an instant Fleury was tempted to deliver a final, heated harangue...but no, it was out of the question. Fleury was left mute, with a faint air of disgrace clinging to him.

It was already daylight when Fleury awoke. A deep and oppressive silence prevailed, as if the bungalow were deserted; above him, the punkah, which had been flapping rhythmically through the night, now hung motionless; in the stagnant air his nightshirt clung to his skin. But when he looked out on the verandah everything was normal. The punkah-wallah had simply fallen asleep; he squatted there on the verandah still holding the rope which led up to a hole high in the wall. Beside him the *khansamah* was buttering some toast for Fleury’s breakfast with the greasy wing of a fowl; seeing Fleury he woke the punkah-wallah with a kick and without a word the man began again the rhythmic tugging at the rope which he had maintained throughout the night.

Fleury dressed rapidly, thankful not to have fallen a prey to the drinking snakes during the night, and then breakfasted with Miriam, who had already risen. They spent the morning together, until it was time for Miriam to dress for a visit to the Dunstaple ladies. The hours dragged by. Fleury found it too hot to go outside. He tried to read a book. Miriam had not returned by four o’clock when Rayne, the Opium Agent, sent one of his servants over to invite Fleury to tea. From the shade of the verandah Fleury watched Rayne’s servant hastening up from the depths of the compound under a black umbrella; once on the verandah he shook it vigorously as if to shake off drops of sunlight.

Fleury had not taken to Rayne the previous evening but his boredom was so acute that he decided to accept. He set off, accompanied by Chloë who had been sleeping all day and was full of energy, under the servant’s umbrella. Rayne’s compound, it transpired, was only separated from that of the Joint Magistrate by the compounds of a couple of deserted bungalows. The two young officials had been firm friends and had been so used to paying each other informal visits without resorting to the road that a path had been worn through the jungle into which these neglected gardens had been allowed to grow...not that it was much of a path for in places the foliage had already shrivelled in the heat and there was no sign of a path at all. Rayne’s bearer led the way past an old, deserted bungalow with holes in its thatched roof and a sagging verandah; beside it, on a little mound, lay the worm-pocked skeleton of a flag-pole, while in front of it there spread a glaring, nightmarish growth of geraniums. As they moved away from the bungalow there came a sudden scuffling sound, then silence.

“What was that?”

“Jackal, Sahib.”

They climbed over a low mud wall, through a mass of wild roses still in bloom and scrambled through a shadeless thicket. Suddenly Fleury stopped dead in his tracks, aware that someone was lurking close by in the thicket, watching him. It was a moment before he saw that there was a figure there, a small fat man with a black face and six arms. A path led up to him; it was a shrine. Fleury approached it, accompanied by the bearer holding the umbrella over his head. “Lord Bhairava,” he explained.

Lord Bhairava’s eyes were white in his black face and he appeared to be looking at Fleury with malice and amusement. One of his six arms held a trident, another a sword, another flourished a severed forearm, a fourth held a bowl, while a fifth held a handful of skulls by the hair: the faces of the skulls wore thin mustaches and expressions of surprise. The sixth hand, empty, held up its three middle fingers. Peering closer,

Fleury saw that people had left coins and food in the bowl he was holding and more food had been smeared around his chuckling lips, which were also daubed with crimson, as if with blood. Fleury turned away quickly, chilled by this unexpected encounter and anxious to leave this sinister garden without delay.

As they proceeded, one sweet suffocating perfume gave way to another so that, bemused with the heat and exertion, he had the impression of floundering through a new and sensuous element. Presently, another deserted bungalow came into sight, this one even more forlorn than the last, almost roofless, with giant thistles growing up out of the windows. An emaciated cow, horns painted green, was browsing on a few tufts of parched grass that had once been a lawn. Then they stepped over another mud wall into an equally barren but more orderly compound. As they approached Rayne's bungalow the sound of voices and laughter could be heard in the stillness and heat of the late afternoon.

After the glare of the compound a midnight darkness seemed to prevail on the verandah. A figure advanced out of the gloom and shook Fleury's hand, welcoming him in loud tones which he recognized as belonging to Rayne. Another figure loomed up, bowed and clicked his heels nearby: this was Burlton who looked after the Treasury. He seemed to be a sensitive young man, anxious to please, and laughing excessively at everything Rayne said. Inside, there was another man, as yet only dimly perceived, who made a motion of bowing from his chair as he was introduced; at the same time he laughed sardonically; his name was Ford, one of the railway engineers. "Always glad to meet a griff," he drawled.

"We have Ford and his ilk but I'm hanged if the railway will ever reach Krishnapur," jeered Rayne, who was evidently somewhat drunk. "Where's that damned bearer? Ram, bring the Sahib a drink... *Simkin* ! That means champagne, old man. We don't drink tea in this house."

Fleury groped his way to a chair and sat down. For a few moments Rayne lapsed into silence and the only sound was his rather heavy breathing. When the bearer returned with a glass of champagne for Fleury, Rayne said loudly: "We call this lad 'Ram'. That's not his real name. His real name is Akbar or Mohammed or something like that. We call him Ram because he looks like one. And this is Monkey," he added as another bearer came in carrying a plate of biscuits. Monkey did not raise his eyes. He had very long arms, it was true, and a rather simian appearance.

"Where are the mems?" Ford wanted to know, but there was no answer.

"Soon it will be cool enough to go for a canter."

"Why don't we play cards till then?"

But nobody made any move. Fleury sipped his champagne which had an unpleasant, sour taste. He could hear Chloë moaning on the verandah where she had been tied up by one of the servants. Presently another servant came in bearing a box of cheroots; he was elderly and dignified, but exceedingly small, almost a midget.

"What d'you call this blighter?" asked Burlton.

"Ant," said Rayne.

Burlton slapped his knee and abandoned himself to laughter.

"I'd like to know what Mr Fleury thinks of this Meerut business," said Ford. "What? Can you beat that! I'm damned if he's even heard of it! Where have you been all day?" And delighted, he set to work to give Fleury what seemed to be a largely imaginary account of some terrible uprising of sepoys, full of "plump young griffins, fellows about your age" being "hacked to pieces in their prime". Fleury could see that he was being made fun of, but was alarmed all the same.

"Don't worry," said Burlton condescendingly; he had been in India almost a year and thus was less of a griffin than Fleury. "Jack Sepoy may be able to cut down defenceless people but he can't stand up to real pluck."

"When did all this happen?"

"What day is today? Tuesday. It happened on Sunday night."

Ford had lost interest in Meerut by this time but Fleury managed to get some idea of what had happened from Burlton. Two native infantry regiments had shot down their officers and broken into open revolt; in due course they had been joined by the *badmashes* from the bazaar who had set to work plundering the British cantonment. The British troops had been on church parade when the trouble started. In the end they had managed to quell the outbreak but the mutineers had escaped with their firearms. The telegraph wires had been cut soon after the first word of the outbreak had come through, but all sorts of grim rumours were circulating. Krishnapur was almost five hundred miles from this trouble. All the same, news travelled fast in India even without the telegraph...one only had to think of the speed with which the chapatis had spread. What nobody knew was whether the sepoys at Captainganj would follow this example and attack the Krishnapur cantonment.

"Ant! Monkey! Bring *simkin* double quick!"

"Of course, they're bound to know of it already," said Burlton. "What beats me, Rayne, is how the blessed natives got to hear of it before I did. I overheard the babus chatting in the Magistrate's office about Meerut this morning. They were saying that the mutinous sepoys had marched on Delhi and that soon the Mogul Empire would be revived."

"A likely story. The people know when they're well off. They wouldn't stand for it."

"Well, *they* seemed to think it could happen. They wanted to know who were the fifty-two rajahs who

would assemble to place the Emperor on the throne."

But Rayne and Ford were not interested in this fancy of Burlton's and Ford said crushingly: "The first thing one learns in India, Burlton, is not to listen to the damned nonsense the natives are always talking." And poor Burlton flushed with shame and avoided Fleury's eye.

Fleury had by now grown accustomed to the gloom and could see that Ford was a heavy-featured man of about forty; in spite of his inferior social status as an engineer, he clearly dominated Rayne and Burlton. Ford said unpleasantly: "Perhaps Mr Fleury will tell us what *he* thinks about it, since he has so many bosom friends among the 'big dogs' at Fort William."

"What I think is this," began Fleury...but what he thought was never revealed for at this moment his interlocutors sprang to their feet. Startled, Fleury jumped up too; all this talk of mutiny had set his nerves on edge. But it was only the two ladies entering the room.

"What a disgusting creature!" exclaimed Mrs Rayne, smiling prettily.

"I beg your pardon?"

"I say, Burlton. Would you mind telling that little beggar to bring more *simkin* for the ladies?"

"Haven't you heard, Mr Fleury, that there is an English-woman who has been behaving disgracefully at the *dak* bungalow? The Padre has been out to reason with her more than once, I hear."

"Could they not send the wretched girl away?" Mrs Ross wanted to know. "She can't live for ever in the *dak* bungalow. At the same time she has clearly forfeited the right to the company of virtuous women."

"Is it true then, Sophie," asked Ford teasingly,

> ""That every woe can a tear can claim,
> Except an erring sister's shame?"'

Ford had pulled his chair closer to that of Mrs Ross and had abandoned his lethargic manner.

"How I wish Florence had a piano," wailed Mrs Ross, changing the subject abruptly. "My fingers fairly ache to play. I fear that Mr Fleury will find but few of the comforts of civilization in Krishnapur, is that not so?" Opening her eyes very wide she gazed interrogatively at Fleury.

"Well," began Fleury, but once again he was forestalled, this time by the arrival of what seemed to be a tornado hitting the verandah and the wooden steps that led up to it. Such a crashing and banging shook the house that the gentlemen started up and made towards the folding louvred doors to see what was the matter. But before they could take more than a couple of steps the doors burst open and a young officer, whom Fleury instantly recognized as Lieutenant Cutter, rode into the room on horseback, wild-eyed, shouting and waving a sabre. The ladies clutched their breasts and did not know whether to shriek with fear or laughter as Cutter, his face as scarlet as his uniform, drove his reluctant horse forward into the room and put it at an empty sofa. Over it went, as clean as a circus pony, and landed, skidding, with a crash on the other side. Cutter then wheeled and flourishing his sabre, lopped the head off a geranium in a pot as he turned his horse to drive it once again at the sofa. But this time the animal refused and Cutter, his sabre still in his hand, slithered off its back on to the floor.

"Do you surrender, sir?" he bellowed at a cushion on the sofa, his arm drawn back for a thrust.

"Yes, it surrenders!" shrieked Mrs Rayne.

"No, it defies you," shouted Ford.

"Then die, sir!" cried Cutter and charging forward transfixed the cushion, at the same time tripping up in a rug in the process, with the result that he collapsed in a whirlwind of feathers on the floor.

"It's just a joke," explained Burlton to Fleury, who was amazed and shaken by this latest development. "He's always up to something. What a clown he is!"

"Who is this griffin?" shouted Cutter, fighting his way out of the rug with which his spurs had become entangled. "Who is this milk-sop? Do you surrender, sir?" And drawing back his sabre once again he seemed to be on the point of running Fleury through.

"Yes, he surrenders!" shouted everyone except Fleury, who merely stood there, too dazed to speak, with the point of the sabre patrolling the buttons of his waistcoat.

"Oh, very well then," said Cutter. "No thanks, Rayne, you can keep your Calcutta champagne. I only drink Todd and James, my horse drinks that rubbish. Monkey, bring brandy pawnee!" But Monkey was evidently familiar with Lieutenant Cutter's tastes for he was already hastening forward with a tray.

"Does Beeswing really drink *simkin* ?" Mrs Rayne wanted to know, for it seemed that Cutter had given his horse the name of the celebrated Calcutta mare. At this, Cutter, who had sunk despondently on to the feather-strewn sofa with his boots and spurs dangling over the end, started up again with a roar and nothing would do but that Beeswing, who all this time had been standing patiently by the window and occasionally dropping his head to try and crop the Persian rug on which he was standing, should join the party too and drink his fill. Ram hurried in with another bottle and a bowl, but Cutter ignored the bowl and seized a solar topee from a side table; into this he splashed the contents of the bottle, guffawing and shouting encouragement to his horse. When the champagne was stuck under his nose Beeswing, who was thirsty from his canter in the late afternoon heat, began to lap it up with a will.

The sun was already low on the horizon and Fleury was anxious to return home to see if Miriam had

returned and to find out if by any chance the Dunstaples wanted to invite him to supper. But such was the jollity surrounding Beeswing that he had the greatest difficulty attracting the attention of his host.

"What? Can you be off already?" exclaimed Rayne. "I haven't yet had a chance to talk to you...A talk about civilization, that's what I wanted to have! You ask Mrs Rayne if I didn't say to her: 'I'll ask him over and we'll have a serious chat about civilization.' My very words. And now you're showing a clean pair of heels."

"I'd be most happy...another time, perhaps. I wonder would you mind asking one of your bearers to accompany me?"

Rayne shouted a command, but then he had to return his attention to Cutter, because he and Ford had just concluded an extravagant wager: namely, a dozen of claret that he and Beeswing could not spring from the compound over the verandah and in through the drawing-room window in one great leap Fleury said goodbye to the ladies and hurried away with Chloë frisking ahead; he was by no means anxious to witness this reckless feat.

4

Dark circles had appeared round the Collector's eyes, and the eyes themselves stared more moodily than ever at other members of the congregation during evening service in the Church; at other times during the service he was seen to hold his head unnaturally still; it was as if his features were carved in rock, on which the only movement was the stirring of the whiskers in the breeze from the punkahs. It was evident that he was having trouble in sleeping for soon he ordered one of the bearers to seek a sleeping draught from the doctor. Dr Dunstaple happened to be away at the time so it was Dr McNab who found himself summoned to attend the Collector. He found him in his bedroom beside the open French window giving on to the verandah.

Dr McNab had only recently come to Krishnapur. His wife had died a couple of years earlier in some other Indian station; otherwise, not much was known about him, apart from what Dr Dunstaple supplied in the way of amusing anecdotes about his medical procedures. His manner was formal and reticent; although still quite young he had a middle-aged and melancholy air and, like many gloomy people, he looked discreet. He had never entered the Collector's bedroom before and was impressed by the elegance with which it was furnished: the thickness of the carpet, the polish of the tables and wardrobes, the grandeur of the Collector's four-poster bed, inherited from a previous Resident, which to a man grown accustomed to the humble *charpoy* appeared unusually impressive.

The Collector looked round briefly as Dr McNab entered, and invited him to come to the window, from where there was an excellent view to the south-west, over the stable yard, over the Cutcherry, to the recently built ramparts of dried mud baking in the afternoon glare.

"Well, McNab, d'you think they will keep out the sepoys if they attack us here as they did at Meerut?"

"I confess I know nothing about military matters, Mr Hopkins."

The Collector laughed, but in a humourless way. "That's a judicious reply, McNab. But perhaps you are better fitted to judge the state of mind of a man who builds a fortress in the middle of a peaceful countryside. Doctor, I'm well aware of what is being said about me in the cantonment on account of the mud ramparts down there."

Dr McNab frowned but remained silent. His eyes, which had been on the Collector's face, dropped to the fingers of his right hand which were too tightly clenched around the lapel of his frock coat in what would have been, otherwise, the calm and commanding posture of a statesman posing for his portrait.

"If no trouble develops in the end, Mr Hopkins, no doubt you will look a fool," he said, then added grimly: "But perhaps it is your duty."

The Collector looked surprised for a moment. "You're quite right, McNab. It's my duty. I have a duty towards the women and children under my protection. Besides, I myself am a family man...I must think of protecting my own children. Perhaps you think that I give too little thought to my children? Perhaps you think that I don't have their welfare sufficiently at heart?" He stared at McNab suspiciously.

"Mr Hopkins, I know nothing of your personal life." This was almost true, but not quite. A short time earlier McNab had happened upon the Collector's children in a velvet brood being escorted by their *ayah* along one of the Residency corridors. And he had remembered hearing that it was by the Collector's order that these children continued to wear velvet, flannel and wool, while the other children in the cantonment were dressed in cotton or muslin for the hot weather. Even as children, it seemed, they had a position to keep up in the community. Only perhaps in the hottest period, when he chanced to notice how red-faced his offspring had become, might the Collector permit a change to summer clothing.

"I can assure you, Dr McNab, that I am as much loved by my children as any father was ever loved," said the Collector, as if reading his mind.

McNab shook his head soothingly, implying that it would never have occurred to him to think otherwise, but the Collector paid no attention to him; instead, he snatched up a leather-bound volume from the table and flourished it. "You see, my daughters bring me their diaries to read so that I may exercise supervision over their lives...I require them to do so, as any right-thinking father would. Every Sunday evening I read a sermon to them and to my other children, by Arnold or Kingsley, just as any father would. Why, I even prepared my

manservant, Vokins, for confirmation by hearing his catechism! I think that you can hardly accuse me of neglecting my duty towards my household…"

"It would never occur to me to accuse you of this or anything else," said the Doctor quietly.

"What? What are you saying? No, of course you wouldn't accuse me of such things. Why should you? But tell me, d'you believe in God, McNab?"

"Aye, of course, Mr Hopkins."

"I wondered because I noticed that you do not attend the Sacrament. No, please don't think that I mean to pry into your beliefs. I was merely curious because I have here a book of my wife's…I found it the other evening…I suppose she left it purposely by my bedside. It's Keble's *The Christian Year*, a series of poems on religious themes, perhaps you know it…? Here, let me read you some lines…Let me see, this will do:

'Lo, at Thy feet I fainting lie,
Mine eyes upon They wounds are bent,
Upon Thy streaming wounds my weary eyes
Wait like the parchèd earth on April skies.'"

He paused and stared interrogatively at McNab, who yet again made no reply. Nor had he any idea what it was that he was supposed to reply to.

"I have always considered myself to believe in God," pursued the Collector after a moment, his dark-ringed eyes searching McNab's face "but I find such enthusiasm offends me. Evidently there are those who believe in Him in a way quite different from mine. And yet, perhaps they are right?"

"It's only possible for a man to believe in his own way, Mr Hopkins. Surely nothing more can be asked of him. So it seems to me, at any rate."

"Splendid, McNab. What a fine philosopher you are, to be sure. 'In his own way', you say. Precisely. And now I shall let you return to your duties." And while he escorted McNab towards the door he laughed as if he were in the best of spirits.

At the door, however, there was a moment of confusion for as McNab approached it, it opened to admit the very brood of children whom he had seen earlier. Now scrubbed and combed, these children had been marshalled by their *ayah* in the corridor outside to be presented to their father while he took his tea. The Collector reached out his arms to the youngest of them, Henrietta, aged five, but she shrank back into the *ayah*'s skirts. As he took his leave, McNab had to pretend not to have noticed this small incident.

Everything had remained quiet in Krishnapur as the news of Meerut had spread, but there had been a number of small signs of unrest, nevertheless. While the Collector was discussing with the Magistrate whether the ladies should be brought into the safety of the Residency a message from Captainganj arrived to say that General Jackson would be calling later to discuss a cricket match that was due to take place between the Captainganj officers and the civilian officials. This message was brought by a havildar who had ridden ahead of the General and who also brought a more ominous piece of news: fires had broken out in the native lines the previous evening.

"The cricket match may be only a stratagem, a means of not arousing suspicion."

The Magistrate made no reply and the Collector wished that for once he would lower that sardonically raised eyebrow.

"I hope the old fellow hasn't begun to go at last."

Presently a thud of hooves alerted the two men to the General's arrival and they moved to the window to watch. General Jackson was escorted by half a dozen native cavalrymen, known as *sowars*, who had dismounted and were now helping him to the ground. As one might have expected in an Army where promotion strictly attended seniority, the General was an elderly man, well over seventy. Moreover, he was portly and small in stature so he could no longer leap in and out of the saddle as had once been his custom; getting him in and out of the saddle these days was no easy task. Distributed on each side of the General's horse, the *sowars* took a firm grip of his breeches and lifted him into the air, his legs kicking petulantly to free his boots from the stirrups. Once he had been lifted clear the horse was led forward and he was lowered to the ground. As he advanced stiffly towards the portico both men noticed with foreboding that instead of a walking stick the General was carrying a cricket bat. Knowing that his memory was no longer quite what it once had been, the General frequently carried some object as an aide-mémoire; thus, if he had come to discuss horses he might carry a riding-crop, if the topic was gunnery he might juggle a couple of musket balls in his pocket.

"There was a new rumour in the bazaar this morning," said the Magistrate as the General disappeared from view. "They say that because so many British were killed in the Crimea there's nobody left in England for the memsahibs to marry. And so they're going to be brought out here and forcibly married to the native landowners. Their children and the lands they own will thus become Christian."

The Collector frowned. "Let us pray that the General is no longer as sanguine as he was before Meerut."

As he finished speaking the General was announced and shown into the library where the Collector and the Magistrate were awaiting him. He flourished the cricket bat cheerfully as he stepped forward, saying: "Now

Hopkins, about this cricket match. In my view it had better wait till after the monsoon...It's much too hot as it is. What d'you think? I know your fellows want their revenge but they'll just have to wait..."

The Magistrate could tell by the expression of distress that appeared fleetingly between the Collector's side-whiskers that they were both thinking the same thing: the General really *had* come to discuss a cricket match.

"Just at the moment, General, we're too concerned about the fires last night to think about cricket."

"Fires?"

"The fires in the native lines at Captainganj last night. We fear that they may be a sign of an impending outbreak."

"Ah yes, I know the ones you mean," said the General cautiously. "But you mustn't let that worry you...The work of some malcontent."

"But General, in the light of Meerut..." The Collector wanted to discuss the prospect of disarming the native regiments. Even now this plan would be risky, he felt, but soon it would become impossible.

But the General reacted to this proposal, for which he could see no earthly reason, first with astonishment, then with scorn and indignation. He refused to accept that the fires indicated disaffection among the sepoys and said so, testily...thinking, however, that Hopkins and Willoughby could hardly be blamed, in a way, because they were civilians and, like all civilians, spent their time either in pettifogging or in "croaking"...Now here they were, decent fellows in many ways, croaking like ravens.

"Why should the sepoys attack their own billets if they were bent on mutiny?" he demanded. "They'd have set fire to the British bungalows if that's what they were up to. As for Meerut, that's a demmed long way from Captainganj, if you'll forgive m'language. Special circumstances, too, shouldn't be surprised. Can't worry here what happens in China! Now look here, Hopkins, provided you fellows here in Krishnapur remain as usual, showing no sign of fear, everything will be alright...But it'll be the devil's own job for us to control our men at Captainganj if you start panickin' here and diggin' mud walls..."

On his way to the Residency he had cast a contemptuous eye on the Collector's fortifications. "Raise extra police with Mohammedan recruits, if you like. They're more reliable than Hindus or native Christians, but don't start a panic."

The Collector flushed, stung by the General's scornful reference to "mud walls"; after a moment's hesitation he asked: "How many English troops have you at Captainganj apart from officers of native regiments?"

For a moment it looked as if the General might refuse to reply. "Odds'n'ends left from two or three companies on their way to Umballa...perhaps forty or fifty men."

"General," said the Collector in a soothing tone, "I should like to know if you'd have any objection to the women and children being brought in?"

"My dear Hopkins, either we rely on a display of confidence that the natives will behave properly, or we all fortify ourselves. We can hardly do both." The General paused, exasperated. Normally, this discussion would have stimulated him to a fearful rage, but while walking up and down the library he had relinquished the cricket bat, which had become tiresome to carry, and at some stage his hand had closed over a book. This book caused him some distress because he was unable to remember whether it was in his hand to remind him of something or not. He had taken a surreptitious look at the title, which was *Missionary Heroes* and told him nothing.

"Provided the civilians at Krishnapur don't start showin' fear I can guarantee that m'men will remain loyal. I am in complete control of the situation," he declared, though with less certainty than before.

"All the same, General, we can't simply ignore the fires at Captainganj. To do so would be the height of folly."

"We will bring the culprit to book!" exclaimed the General suddenly, with such a burst of confidence that for a moment even the Collector looked encouraged.

A week of indecision passed. News came of a massacre at Delhi but still the Collector hesitated to give the order for women and children to be brought into the Residency; he could see that there was some truth in what the General had said about showing fear; on the other hand, he continued surreptitiously to collect powder and provisions to store in the Residency in spite of the General's disapproval. What he most needed were cannons and muskets or, even better, rifles...but he could not ask Captainganj to supply them without risking a fatal breach with the old General.

Meanwhile, those in the cantonment who followed the General and had been advocating a "display of confidence" continued to recommend it...what had gone wrong at Meerut, they declared, was undoubtedly that the Europeans had begun to "croak", had tried to make concessions. The Collector's defensive measures, besides being ridiculous and inadequate, could very well generate the very danger they were supposed to guard against! At the same time, another question was being asked in the cantonment by the opposite and more timorous faction: namely, what was the point in feigning a confidence that no one felt and that in the eyes of the natives must appear quite baseless?

But it is probable that the majority of people in the cantonment could not make up their minds as to the best course to follow. While the "confident" party recommended calm and indifference, and the "nervous" party were all for bolting to the Residency, the majority voted now for one course, now for the other, and

sometimes even for both at once...a calm and confident bolting to the Residency.

Fleury himself was, in principle, all for bolting, if that was what everybody wanted to do...but he knew so little about the country that he had no real way of knowing whether or not the time for bolting had come. He had no sensation of danger in the least. The result was that he tended, by default, to find himself in the "confident" camp...though, at the same time, quite ready to leg it for the Residency at the first sign of trouble.

The Collector regretted the spirit of animosity that was developing in the cantonment between the two opposing factions. "After all," he thought, "we both want the same thing: security for our lives and property...Why on earth should we be at each other's throats? Why do people insist on defending their ideas and opinions with such ferocity, as if defending honour itself? What could be easier to change than an idea?" The Collector himself, however, did not yield an inch in his conviction that the only ultimate refuge lay behind his mud walls. Feuds began to break out between the two factions, exacerbated by the steadily mounting heat of the sun. They accused each other of endangering the lives of the innocent, of women and children. While one party seldom missed an opportunity of loitering unarmed and defenceless in the midst of the crowds that thronged the bazaar, the other never ventured a step from their bungalows unless clanking with weapons.

The Collector, in a first and last effort to lead the community in a democratic manner, spent these days trying to devise measures which combined insouciance with defensive properties. In this spirit he had a number of heavy stone urns set up along one vulnerable stretch of the compound wall and planted with flowers, which promptly withered in the heat. Next, he declared that he wanted a stone wall along another weak section of the compound perimeter in order to shield the croquet lawn from the glare of the evening sun. While it was being built he showed a sudden flourish of paternal indulgence by doggedly knocking balls through hoops in the company of his swooning elder daughters. His daughters at the best of times were not good at croquet, but now, on this sweltering patch of sun-baked earth...So the Collector won game after game, implacably, because it was his duty...and his daughters lost game after game, inevitably, because they were weak.

5

The Maharajah had his own army which although forbidden by law to carry firearms could still prove useful with sabres and the iron-bound bamboo staves, known as *lâtees*, with which most disputes among rival *zemindars* were traditionally settled. If it came to a fight whose side would the Maharajah's troops be on? Of course they would be no match for the sepoys but they still might come in handy to frighten the *badmashes* in the bazaar. The Collector had to pay a routine visit to the opium factory some way out of Krishnapur and so it was decided that Fleury and Harry Dunstaple should accompany him for part of the way and pay a visit to the Maharajah's palace which was not far from the opium factory...in normal circumstances a newcomer like Fleury might be expected to pay a casual visit of courtesy to the Maharajah to collect some exotic items of local colour for his diary, subsequently perhaps to be published under the title *Highways and Byways of Hindustan*, or something of that sort. At the same time the two young men might be able to see how the land lay with respect to the troops. It was, of course, out of the question to ask openly for the Maharajah's support because such a question would imply a drastic lack of confidence. Besides, Harry, as a military man loyal to the General, could not have been expected to convey such a request. All the same, one never knew...perhaps the Maharajah's son, Hari, whom Harry had met several times and who was a great favourite of the Collector's might pledge this support without being asked.

At the last moment Fleury discovered that Miriam had been invited to accompany the party; it appeared that she had displayed a sudden interest in the workings of an opium factory and that the Collector had decided she should see one for herself. Fleury was obscurely displeased by this discovery.

"It may be perilous," he grumbled.

"It certainly won't be more perilous, dearest Dobbin, than remaining by myself in a bungalow surrounded by native servants who are scarcely known to us," replied Miriam with a smile. "Besides, I shall be in the company of Mr Hopkins. Surely that is protection enough."

"In Calcutta you said he had taken leave of his senses."

"On the contrary, sir, it was *you* who said that."

Fleury had noticed before that his sister seemed to become more animated in the Collector's presence and he suspected her of some flirtatious design. While they were waiting for the Collector's carriage to call for them he noticed further that Miriam was wearing her favourite bonnet, which she seldom wore merely in his own company. His sense of propriety was offended, as indeed it often was, but more by Miriam's opinions than by her behaviour. Although adventurous in some respects, Fleury had rather strict ideas about how his elder sister should behave. But he could find nothing precisely to accuse her of. Regulating Miriam's behaviour was made even more difficult by the fact that she had, to a large extent, supervised his own childhood. "And don't call me 'Dobbin'," he added crossly as an afterthought.

Ahead, the sun was rising above the rim of the plain into the dust-laden atmosphere. The Collector was in an expansive mood again: the motion of the open landau, the coolness and beauty of the morning filled him with confidence. He set himself to explain to Fleury about the character of rich natives: their sons were brought up in an effeminate, luxurious manner. Their health was ruined by eating sickly sweetmeats and indulging in other weakening behaviour. Instead of learning to ride and take up manly sports they idled away their time girlishly flying kites. Everything was for show with your rich native...he would travel the countryside with a splendid retinue while at home he lived in a pigsty. But fortunately, young Hari, the Maharajah's son, had been educated by English tutors and was a different kettle of fish. To this information Harry Dunstaple added gruffly: "You have to be careful thrashing a Hindu, George, because they have very weak chests and you can kill them...Father says it's a thinness of the pericardium." Fleury murmured his thanks for this warning, indicating that he would do his best to hold himself back from the more fatal blows...but he privately hoped that the situation would not arise. He was still having difficulty adapting himself to his new "broad-shouldered" character.

In due course they turned off their road on to another track which ran between fields of mustard, shining yellow and green. Ahead of them what looked like a mountain of dried mud shimmered over a scanty jungle of brush and peepul trees; the Collector uttered a grunt of pleasure: evidently the sight of so much mud reminded him of his own "mud walls". As they got nearer, the mountain of mud transformed itself into high, shabby walls, unevenly battlemented. The track led towards massive wooden gates, bound and studded in iron, set between square towers of mud and plaster. These towers were not solid, Fleury noticed as the landau passed between them, but hollow and three-sided with an open floor of rafters built halfway up. The hollowed-out space seethed with soldiers, some practically naked, others amazingly uniformed like Zouaves with blue tunics and baggy orange trousers and armed to the teeth with daggers and clubs. Many of the more naked of the soldiers were still reclining, however, on the straw mattresses which covered the floor.

"Rabble," said Harry with a superior smile. "Our Adjutant, Chambers, says they're no more use in a fight than the chorus at Covent Garden. Over there is where the so-called Prime Minister lives." The building indicated by Harry was in the French style with balconies and shuttered windows. It had an abandoned air.

They had passed into an outer courtyard, in the centre of which was a derelict fountain and a plot of grass

where a hoopoe dug busily with its long beak. Pieces of wood, old mattresses and broken cartwheels lay around. To the left, between low buildings which might have been stables, stood another archway leading to the Maharajah's apartments. They proceeded through into the next courtyard and halted by some stone steps to allow the young men to alight. Then the landau turned in a wide circle and bore the two silhouetted heads, one wearing a pith helmet, the other a bonnet, back towards the arches, beneath which they presently vanished.

Fleury and Harry had promptly been surrounded by a swarm of servants in an extravagantly conceived but grimy livery; in the midst of this chattering throng they made their way along a stifling corridor, up another flight of steps and out on to a long stone verandah, where they at last felt a faint, refreshing breeze on their faces. Beside elaborately carved doors a guard in Zouave uniform dozed with his cheek against the shaft of a spear. Their host awaited them within, the servants explained, and they found themselves pushed forward in a gale of muffled giggles.

The room they were thus urged into proved to be a delightful place, with an atmosphere of coolness, light and space; three of its walls were of blood-coloured glass alternating with mirrors and arranged in flower-shaped wooden frames; outside, green louvred shutters deflected the sunlight. Chandeliers of Bohemian glass hung in a line across the middle of the room with himalayas of crystal climbing between the lipped candle-glasses. Along the fourth wall, which was solid rather than of glass, ran primitive portraits of several past maharajahs. These faces stared down at the two young Englishmen with arrogance and contempt...though really it was just one face, Fleury noticed, as he passed along, repeated again and again with varying skill and in varying head-dresses, composed of coal-black eyes which seemed to be all pupil, and fat, pale cheeks garnished with a wispy black beard and mustache.

Near a fireplace of marble inlaid with garnets, lapis lazuli and agate, the Maharajah's son sat on a chair constructed entirely of antlers, eating a boiled egg and reading *Blackwood's Magazine*. Beside the chair a large cushion on the floor still bore the impression of where he had been sitting a moment earlier; he preferred squatting on the floor to the discomfort of chairs but feared that his English visitors might regard this as backward.

"Hello there, Lieutenant Dunstaple," he exclaimed, springing to his feet and striding forward to greet them, "I see you've been kind enough to bring Mr Fleury along...How splendid! How kind!" And he continued to give the impression of striding forward by a simulated movement which, however, only carried him a matter of inches towards his visitors and was a compromise between his welcoming nature, which urged him to advance and shake people warmly by the hand, and his status as the Maharajah's heir, which obliged him to stand his ground and be approached. This mimed movement in the presence of inferiors entitled to some respect, which included all the British in India, had developed swiftly in the course of social contact with Europeans so that by now it had become not only quite unconscious, but also so perfect as utterly to destroy perspective. The result was that Fleury found himself having to advance a good deal further than he expected and arrived at his host somewhat off balance, his last few steps a succession of afterthoughts.

"Why did my dear friend Mr Hopkin not call to see me? I am hurt. You must tell him so. It's most very unkind of him. How's your wrist, Dunstaple?"

"A little better thank you," Harry said, rather stiffly, as they crossed a rich, dusty carpet scattered here and there with ragged tiger skins. Nearer at hand Fleury was startled to see that the face of their host exactly resembled that of the score of portraits on the wall; the same fat, pale cheeks and glittering black eyes surmounted a plump body clad, not in Mogul robes, but in an ill-cut frock coat. He had been watching Fleury intently and now, seeing that he was about to open his mouth, broke in hastily: "No, please don't call me 'Highness' or any of that nonsense. We don't stand on ceremony in this day and age...Leave that sort of thing to Father...Just call me Hari...There are two Haris, eh? Well, never mind. How delightful. What a pleasure!"

Fleury said: "I hope we haven't interrupted your breakfast, but I fear that we have."

"Not in the least, old fellow. A boiled egg and *Blackwood's* is the best way to begin the day. Now, come and sit down. I say, are you alright, Dunstaple?" For Harry, stepping forward, had given a rather odd lurch and had almost plunged on to one of the ragged tiger skins. His face, now they came to look at it, was as white as milk, though given a superficial tinge of colour by the bloodstained glass of the windows.

"It's nothing. It's just the heat. I shall be alright in a moment. Damned silly!"

"Correct!" cried Hari. "It's nothing. You'll be all right in twinkling. Come and sit down while I get the bearer to bring refreshment. Where is he the wretched fellow?" And he hurried to the door shouting.

In response to their master's shouts more servants in grimy livery poured in, barefoot but in knee breeches, carrying two more chairs constructed of antlers; these they placed adjacent to Hari's and to a small table supported by rhinoceros feet on which Hari had abandoned his half-eaten boiled egg. Tea was brought, and three foaming glasses of iced sugar cane juice, a delightful shade of dark green. Harry Dunstaple, looking a little green himself, rejected this delicious drink, but Fleury who loved sweet things and had never noticed the filth and flies that surround the pressing of sugar cane, drank it down with the greatest pleasure, and then admired the empty glass which was embossed with the Maharajah's crest. Harry asked permission to undo the buttons of his tunic and with a shaking hand began to fumble with them.

"Sir, make yourself altogether as if in your home, I beg you! Bearer, bring more cushion."

Cushions were arranged on the floor and Harry was persuaded to lie down. "Damned silly. Alright in a

moment," Fleury heard him mutter again, as he stretched out and closed his eyes.

"Bearer, bring tiger skin!" and a tiger skin was also stretched over Harry, but he kicked it aside petulantly. He was much too hot already without tiger skins. Fleury was very concerned by Harry's sudden debility (could it be cholera?) and wondered aloud whether he should not take him back promptly to the cantonment and put him under his father's care.

"Oh, Mr Fleury, it is much too damnably hot to travel now until evening."

"They make such a frightful fuss," muttered Harry without opening his eyes. "Just give me an hour or so and I shall be right as rain." He sounded quite cross.

"Mr Fleury, Dunstaple will have refreshing repose here and during this time I shall show you palace. I call Prime Minister to watch Dunstaple and tell us if condition worsen."

Harry's groan of irritation at this further intervention was ignored and the Prime Minister was summoned. They waited for him in silence. When he at last appeared he proved to be a stooped, elderly gentleman, also wearing a frock coat but without trousers or waistcoat; he wore instead a dhoti, sandals, and on his head a peaked cap covered in braid like that of a French infantry officer. He evidently spoke no English for he put his palms together and murmured " *Namaste*" in the direction of Fleury. He seemed unsurprised to find an English officer stretched on the floor.

There was a rapid exchange in Hindustani which ended in Hari gaily shouting: "Correct!" and taking Fleury by the arm; as they left the room the Prime Minister was sitting on the floor with his knees to his chin, staring introspectively at the supine Harry.

Once outside Hari brightened visibly. "Mr Fleury, dear sir, I am delighted to make your acquaintance. Collector, you know, Hopkin is my very good friend, most interested in advance of science. This English coat, sir, is it very costly? Forgive me asking but I admire the productions of your nation very strongly. May I feel the material? And this timepiece in pocket, a half hunter is it not called? English craftsmen are so skilled I am quite lost in admiration for, you see, here our poor productions are in no wise to be compared with them. Yes, I see you are looking at my coat which is also of English flannel, though bought in Calcutta, unfortunately, and cut by *durzie* from bazaar and not by your Savile Rows. Timepiece is purchased in London and not Calcutta also I think?"

"It was a present from my father."

"Correct! From your father, you say. I have heard that fathers most frequently give to the sons who leave home the Holy Bible, your very sacred scripture of Christian religion, is that not the case? Did your father give you also Holy Bible when you came to India?"

"As a matter of fact the only book he gave me was Bell's Life."

"Your father gave you Bell's Life? But is that not a sporting magazine? That is not sacred scripture? I do not understand why your father gave you this book instead of Holy Bible...Sir, please explain this to me because I do not understand in the smallest amount." And Hari gazed at Fleury in bewilderment.

Meanwhile, they had moved on to an outer verandah overlooking the river and formed of the same mud battlements Fleury had noticed on the approach. It was the same river, too, which, after a few twists and turns, passed the lawn of the Residency six or seven miles away. But it was no cooler here; a gust of hot air as from the opening of an oven door hit Fleury in the face as he stepped out...the river, moreover, had shrunk away to a narrow, barely continuous stream on the far bank, leaving only a wide stretch of dry rubble to mark its course with here and there a few patches of wet mud. Half a dozen water buffaloes were attempting to cool themselves in this scanty supply of water.

"He didn't give it me *instead* of the Bible," explained Fleury, who had attempted the mildest of pleasantries and now regretted it. He added untruthfully, sensing that the situation required it: "He had already given me the Bible on a previous occasion."

"Correct! Bell's Life he gave you for pleasure. All is no longer 'as clear as mud'. The Holy Bible it must be a very beautiful work, very beautiful. Religion I do enjoy very greatly, Mr Fleury, do you not also? Oh, it is one of the best things in life beyond shadows of doubt." And Hari stared at Fleury with a smile of beatitude on his fat, pale cheeks. Fleury said: "Yes, how true! I'd never thought of it like that before. We should enjoy religion, of course, and 'lift up our hearts'...of course we should." He was surprised and touched by this remark of Hari's and wondered why he had never thought of it himself. They were now pacing over a continuation of the verandah made of wooden planks, many of them loose, which spanned an interior courtyard...below were a number of buildings that might have been *godowns* or servants' quarters; there was a well, too, and a man washing himself by it, and more servants in livery squatting with their backs to the mud wall of the palace. A peacock, feathers spread, was revolving slowly on the dilapidated roof of one of the buildings below and Hari, under a sudden impulse of warmth towards Fleury, pointed it out and said: "That is very holy bird in India because our God Kartikeya ride peacock. He was born in River Ganga as six little baby but Parvati, lady of Siva, she loved them all so very very dearly she embraced them so tight she squeezed into one person but with six face, twelve arm, twelve leg...'and so on and so forth', as my teacher used to say, Mr Barnes of Shrewsbury." Hari closed his eyes and smiled with an expression of deep contentment, whether at the thought of Kartikeya or of Mr Barnes of Shrewsbury, it was impossible to say.

Fleury, however, glanced at him in dismay: he had forgotten for the moment just what sort of religion it was that Hari enjoyed...a mixture of superstition, fairy-tale, idolatry and obscenity, repellent to every decent

Englishman in India. As if to underline this thought, the bearer who had served refreshments a little earlier suddenly appeared in the courtyard below. He held something in his hand as he laughed and exchanged a few words with the other servants and it flashed in the sunlight; he raised it, examined it casually, then dropped it on the flagstones where it shattered. Fleury was certain that it was the glass from which he himself had been drinking a little earlier.

They walked on, Fleury chilled by this trivial incident; how could one respond warmly to someone who regarded your touch as pollution? But Hari, on the other hand, had noticed nothing and was still thinking warmly of Fleury...how different he was from the stiff, punctilious Dunstaple! He could hardly bear to look at Dunstaple's face: there was something obscene about blue eyes...In fact, that had been the only real drawback to Mr Barnes, for he too had had blue eyes.

"And so on and so forth," he repeated with pleasure. "Mr Barnes has gone back to England. Perhaps you have made acquaintance with him? No? One year ago he wrote me letter from Shrewsbury. He is a very fine gentleman. I would like to ask special favour of you, Mr Fleury, sir. I would like to have pleasure of making daguerrotype of you, you see I am most very interested in science, sir. In Krishnapur I am only one who make daguerrotype and all who want picture come and see me. Mr and Mrs Hopkins, Collector and his bride, come to me, and many other married persons in cantonment. I have made pictures to send to England for absent brides and love ones. You also have bride in England, sir, I think? No? How is that? Your bride is perhaps no longer 'in the land of the living'?" And Fleury was obliged to explain that so far he had not succeeded in capturing a bride...he had been unable to find one to suit his fancy. Hari's brow puckered at this, for it was evident that Fleury was impeded from choosing a bride by being unable to find one suited to some special requirements of his own, beyond the usual ones of birth and dowry...but what these might possibly be he had not the faintest idea; in this matter Hari's incomprehension was shared by Fleury's own relations in Norfolk and Devon.

"Soon I make daguerrotype but first I show you my pater. Come with me please. At this hour when it is so very much hot he is usually to be found 'in arms of Morpheus' which means, I understand, that he is asleeping. It is best time to look at pater when he is asleeping...Correct!" and Hari, laughing cheerfully, led the way.

As they walked on through breathless mud corridors and climbed narrow stone steps Fleury found himself thinking again of Kartikeya, what a charming story, after all! Six babies pressed by love into one, there was surely no harm in such a pleasant fairy story.

They were now progressing through windowless inner apartments, dimly lit by blazing rags soaked in linseed or mustard oil and stuck on five-pronged torches. In the distance an oil lamp of blue glass cast a sapphire glow over a small, fat gentleman sprawled on a bed and clad only in a loin cloth; above the bed an immense jewelled and tasselled punkah swept steadily back and forth. A bearer stood beside the bed holding an armful of small cushions.

"Father is asleeping," Hari explained softly. "He has blue light for asleeping, green light for awaking, red light for entertaining ladies, and so on and so forth. To make comfortable he has cushion under every joint of body...bearer watch him to place cushion under joint when he move."

Hardly had Hari given this explanation when the Maharajah with a grunt kicked out one of his short, plump legs. Instantly cushions appeared under knee and ankle. Fleury could now see that the Maharajah's face was yet another copy of the portraits he had seen earlier and of Hari himself. As he watched, the Maharajah's mouth opened, stained red with betel, and he belched resonantly. "Father is breaking wind," commented Hari. "Now come with me please, my dear Mr Fleury, and I shall show you many wonderful things. First and foremost, you would like perhaps to see abominable pictures?"

"Well..."

Hari spoke to one of the bearers who advanced with a cup containing blazing, oil-soaked rags on the end of a long, silver pole. He held this close to the wall and a large and disgusting oil-painting sprang out of the gloom. But Fleury found that the picture was such an intricate mass of limbs that he was quite unable to fathom what it was all about (though it was clearly very lewd indeed).

"Sir, shall I show you more disgraceful pictures? Very disgraceful indeed?"

"No thank you," said Fleury, and then, not wanting to sound ungrateful, he added gruffly: "I'm afraid I'm not very well up in this sort of thing."

"Correct! For a gentleman 'well up' in science and progress it is not in the least rather interesting. Come, I show you many other things."

Suddenly there came what sounded like the lowing of a cow from the adjoining apartment; Hari frowned and spoke sharply to one of the servants, evidently to tell him to steer the animal in another direction, but already it was clattering towards them. "This is most backward," muttered Hari. "I am sorry you have witnessed such a thing, Mr Fleury. My father should not be permitting it. Always in India cow here, cow there, cow everywhere!" The cow, alarmed by the servants, hastened forward and was only diverted at the last moment from charging the sleeping Maharajah. An elderly servant hurried after it with a large silver bowl.

"To catch dropping," explained Hari as they moved on. "Here march of science is only just beginning, you understand."

They now found themselves in the armoury, which turned out to contain not only arms of every imaginable

sort but many other things as well. But Fleury could only stare with indifference and wish they could discuss religion or science or some such topic. He had some spying to do, too, on the Maharajah's troops, better not forget that! He was unaware of Hari's sensitive and vulnerable eyes devouring his every reaction to the objects he was being shown.

"This is not rather interesting at all," apologized Hari with intensity. "This is spear-pistol. Shoot and stab one gentleman at the same time. When sharp point stabs gentleman breast, mechanism releases trigger, shoots gentleman also."

"Good heavens," said Fleury languidly.

"This big knife open out into four small knife, stab person four times."

"Well..."

"And here is brass cannon which can be mounted on camel saddle. This is rather very dull also, don't you think?" And Hari began to look rather annoyed.

"I think, Fleury, that you will not find this absorbing, too," he pursued relentlessly, indicating a rack of flint-lock guns with extraordinarily long barrels which could be re-loaded from horseback without dismounting, a sporting rifle by Adams with a revolving magazine, a cap in the shape of a cow pat with a feather of gold tinsel sprouting from it which had belonged to Hari's grandfather, and an ostrich egg.

Fleury stifled a yawn, which Hari unfortunately noticed but yet he continued as if unable to stop himself: "This is astrological clock, very complicated...The circle in centre shows zodiacal sign over which the sun pass once in year...From movement of this black needle which passes over circle in twenty-four hours the ascendant of horoscope can be ascertained. But I see that this miserable machine, which show also, I forget to add, phases of moon, sunrise and sunset, day of week, is not worthy of your attention also. Correct. It is all very humble and useless materials such as you do not have in London and Shrewsbury. Now, Fleury, I make daguerrotype."

As soon as the landau had arrived at the opium factory the Collector handed Miriam over to Mr Rayne and vanished about his business in the neighbourhood. Mr Rayne then handed her over in turn to one of his deputies, Mr Simmons, and instructed him to show her the process by which opium is refined. Mr Simmons was a little younger, Miriam found, than her brother; he was a nice young man whose freckled skin was peeling seriously in several places. Not many ladies visited the factory and Mr Simmons, in any case, was unused to their company. His manner was excessively deferential and he blushed frequently for no apparent reason. In addition, he was very zealous in his explanations and allowed few details of the preparation of opium to escape Miriam's notice. He conducted her round immense iron vats and invited her to peer at mysterious fermenting liquids...mysterious because although Miriam was told all about them, she discovered that Mr Simmons's words slipped through her mind like fish through a sluice-gate the instant after he had spoken them...this was embarrassing and she had to be careful that he did not notice. But gradually it became clear that although Mr Simmons was overwhelmed by the superior qualities of the gentler sex, to the extent that a too personal smile or frown from her would have crushed him as easily as a moth beneath the sole of her shoe, he did not include the possibility of intelligence among these qualities. He did not expect to be understood or remembered from one instant to the next.

Miriam was content, however. The drowsy scent of the poppy hung everywhere in the hot darkness of the warehouses and lulled her senses. She felt wonderfully at peace and was sorry when at last the tour came to an end and she was taken to watch the workmen making the finished opium into great balls, each as big as a man's head, which would be packed forty to a chest and auctioned in Calcutta. Each of these head-sized balls, explained Mr Simmons quietly but with the air of someone speaking his words into a high wind, would fetch about seventy-six shillings, while to the *ryot* and his family the Government paid a mere four shillings a pound. As he talked he nervously scratched his peeling wrists and brow while Miriam, diverted, sleepily tried to think of a sensible question and watched the falling flakes of skin drift to the ground.

When the Collector returned, Miriam smuggled a last yawn into her gloved hand, said goodbye to Mr Simmons and climbed back into the landau, which now had its hood raised against the sun. Mr Simmons blushed again and a few more flakes of skin drifted away. Miriam raised her gloved hand to wave and the yawn it was holding seemed to float away on the poppy-scented air. She would have liked to recommend a certain pomade to Mr Simmons but was afraid that in doing so she might crush him like a moth beneath her shoe. How sleepy she felt! If the Collector began to talk to her she would never be able to stay awake.

Before they had properly emerged from the jungle of scrub on to the road an incident occurred to revive her. A naked man suddenly stepped out on to the track they were following. He was tall and well built; in one hand he carried the trident of the devotee of Siva, in the other a brass pot containing smouldering embers. His hair and beard hung in untidy yellowish ropes over his bronzed body, almost as far as his male parts. In a moment the landau had creaked and swayed past him; the path was deeply rutted and they kept rising and falling, as if in a small boat breasting a succession of unexpected waves. The Collector could not help turning to Miriam sternly, shocked on her behalf...but Miriam's cheeks had only pinkened slightly and she said with a faint smile: "You must tell me why such men do not wear clothes, Mr Hopkins. In winter they must surely feel the cold."

“I believe that he must belong to a Hindu sect which has renounced the material world. Such men see their nakedness as a symbol of this renunciation and keep a fire constantly burning at their side to signify the burning up of earthly desires.” He added reluctantly: “One can’t help but admire the rigour with which they pursue their beliefs.”

“Even though they follow an erroneous path?”

“One has to admit, Mrs Lang, that few Christians follow the true one with as much zeal. Indeed, this renders the conversion of the native very difficult for beside this ascetic fervour he sees the Christian priest living in a comfortable house with a wife and family...and I fear he’s not impressed. Not only the clergyman but the whole Christian community must seem very dissolute to him, I’m afraid...What use is it if we bring the advantages of our civilization to India without also displaying a superior morality? I believe that we are all part of a society which by its communal efforts of faith and reason is gradually raising itself to a higher state...There are rules of morality to be followed if we are to advance, just as there are rules of scientific investigation...Mrs Lang, we are raising ourselves, however painfully, so that mankind may enjoy in the future a superior life which now we can hardly conceive! The foundations on which the new men will build their lives are Faith, Science, Respectability, Geology, Mechanical Invention, Ventilation and Rotation of Crops!...”

The Collector talked on and on but Miriam, soothed by the heat and the poppy fumes, cradled by the worn leather upholstery of the landau, found that her eyelids kept creeping down in spite of herself. Even when the Collector began to shout, as he presently did, about the progress of mankind, about the ventilation of populous quarters of cities, about the conquest of ignorance and prejudice by the glistening sabre of man’s intelligence, she could not manage to keep her eyes properly open.

And so, as the landau creaked away into the distance, dust pouring back from the chimneys of its wheels, the Collector’s shouts rang emptily over the Indian plain which stretched for hundreds of miles in every direction, and Miriam fell at last into a deep sleep.

In the meantime, although Fleury had not yet noticed it, Hari’s good humour had deserted him. He continued to point things out to Fleury...some embroidered rugs and parasols, and a collection of sea-shells, but he did so carelessly, as if it were of no importance to him whether or not Fleury found them of interest.

“You know also how to make daguerrotype, I suppose.”

“I’m afraid not.”

“Not? Ah? But I thought all advance people...” Hari raised his eyebrows in surprise.

“Hari,” said Fleury presently, and from his tone it was hard to tell whether he was breathless with excitement or was simply having trouble keeping up with his host, who was now bounding along a dim inner corridor at the greatest speed. “I say, I hope you don’t mind me calling you Hari, but I feel that we understand each other so well...”

The speed and gloom which attended their progress prevented Fleury from seeing Hari’s frostily raised eyebrow.

“Would you mind if we went a little slower? It’s fearfully hot.” But Hari appeared not to hear this request.

“Do we understand each other? Sit here, please.”

They had entered a whitewashed room giving on to the courtyard Fleury had seen earlier from above. No sooner had he stepped over the threshold than he was seized by a fit of coughing, for the air in here was laden with mercury vapour and a variety of other fumes no less toxic, emanating from crystals and solutions of chlorine, bromine, iodine, and potassium cyanide. On a table there was a mercury bath, a metal container in the shape of an inverted pyramid with a spirit lamp already burning beneath it. A camera box had been placed on an ornate metal stand, pointing at a chair by the window. Still coughing, Fleury was steered towards the chair and made to sit down; it had a rod at the back surmounted by an iron crescent for keeping the sitter’s head still. Fleury’s head was forced firmly back into it and some adjustments were made behind him, tightening two thin metal clamps which nestled in his hair above each ear.

“Of course we do, Hari,” said Fleury warmly, though rather stiffly because of the immobility of his head. “I can see you feel the same about all those not very useful things you have just been showing me as I feel about the sort of junk the Collector has in the Residency. What you and I object to is the *emptiness of the life behind* all these objects, their materialism in other words. Objects are useless by themselves. How pathetic they are compared with noble feelings! What a poor and limited world they reveal beside the world of the eternal soul!” Fleury paused, guiltily aware that he was indulging “feelings” once more. “As you were walking along just now pointing out how uninteresting everything was, I suddenly realized that it makes no difference that I was born in England and that you were born in India...Your ancestors have been taking an interest in just the same sort of irrelevant rubbish as mine have. D’you see what I mean?”

It was hard to tell whether Hari saw what he meant or not, for he merely grunted and fished in the pocket of his waistcoat for his watch; this was a gold watch, as it happened, but one would not have thought so, because Hari had spent so much time in the mercury-laden atmosphere of this room that both watch and chain had become coated with a white amalgam. He was frowning now as he picked up a copper plate coated with silver and began to polish it with soft leather and pumice, using slow, deliberate strokes parallel to the edges of the plate, first in one direction, then in the other.

“A spear that shoots someone as well as stabbing him? Ludicrous! And all these other things you have shown me, collections of this and that, sea-shells and carved ivory, disgraceful pictures, chairs made of antlers and astronomical clocks, d’you know what they remind me of?”

“No,” said Hari sullenly. He was now looking pale as well as angry, perhaps from his exertions or because he had inhaled too much mercury vapour...He was still polishing the silvered copper plate but had exchanged the leather for a pad of silk.

“They remind me of the Great Exhibition!”

“They had disgraceful pictures in Great Exhibition, I did not know?” said Hari, curious in spite of himself and slightly mollified by this comparison.

“No, of course not. But what I mean is that the Great Exhibition was not, as everyone said it was, a landmark of civilization; it was for the most part a collection of irrelevant rubbish such as your ancestors might well have collected.”

Hari winced at this reference to his ancestors and turned paler than ever; his polishing of the plate intensified. But Fleury did not notice. He was seething with excitement and would have sprung to his feet, gesticulating, had not his head been firmly wedged in the iron ring.

“Take the Indian Court in the Crystal Palace, it was full of useless objects. There were spears, a life-sized elephant with a double howdah, swords, umbrellas, jewels, and rich cloths...the very things you have just been showing me. In fact, the whole Exhibition was composed merely of collections of this and that, utterly without significance...There was an Observatory Hive...ah, the tedious comparisons that were made between mankind and the hive’s ‘quietly-employed inhabitants, those living emblems of industry and order.’!”

Hari, whose face remained stony and expressionless, had finished polishing; the plate no longer had a silver appearance but seemed black. He now had to focus the lens of the camera on Fleury.

“Take your hands off chest, Fleury,” he ordered, for Fleury was gripping his lapels and the movement of his breathing would undoubtedly blur the image.

“I’m afraid I’m not making myself very clear,” Fleury groaned; he had become carried away with his denunciation of materialism and was dizzy, moreover, with the heat and the fumes of chemicals and the pressure of the clamps on his skull. “What I mean is that collections of objects, whether weapons or sea-shells or a life-sized stuffed elephant, are nothing but distractions for people who have been unable to make a real spiritual advance.”

“And Science? Were there not many wonderful machines?”

“It’s true that the Agricultural Court was often full of bushy-whiskered farmers staring at strange engines...But reflect, these engines were merely improved methods for doing the wrong thing.”

“The wrong thing! I am sad, Fleury, that you should be so very backwards. These machines make more food, more money, save very much labour,” said Hari coldly and vanished under a tent of dark muslin hung over a frame in one corner of the room. An instant later his head reappeared from beneath the draped muslin, black eyes glittering in his pale, flabby face. “And this that I am doing to you at the moment, perhaps this is not progress also!” he demanded angrily. His head vanished again.

Fleury gazed at the muslin tent bewildered. He could hear Hari muttering angrily to himself as he made the metal plate sensitive to light by passing it through his two wooden coating boxes, which between them were largely responsible for the toxic fumes which Fleury could feel assailing his powers of reason. Each box contained a blue-green glass jar: in one jar there was a small amount of iodine crystals, in the other, a mysterious substance called “quickstuff” which contained bromine and chlorine compounds and served to increase the sensitivity of the plate. By holding the plate over the evaporating iodine crystals for less than a minute Hari allowed a thin layer of light-sensitive iodide of silver to form over it; when it had turned orange-yellow he held it over the “quickstuff” until it turned deep pink, then back over the iodine for a few seconds. Then, grinding his teeth with rage, he slipped the sensitized plate into a wooden frame to protect it from light while it was not in the camera, and emerged trembling from his dark muslin tent.

“Perhaps this is not progress also?” he repeated, waving the boxed plate in front of Fleury’s pinioned head in a threatening manner. “To make metal sensitive to light.”

“Yes, it is progress, of course...but, well, only in the art of making pictures. Mind you, that is no doubt wonderful in its way. But the only *real* progress would be to make a man’s heart sensitive to love, to Nature, to his fellow men, to the world of spiritual joy. My dear Hari, Plato did more for the human race than Monsieur Daguerre.”

Hari put the plate in the camera and pulled out the protective slide. “I beg you not to insult any more my ancestors nor this very worthy gentleman, Mr Daguerre.”

“Please don’t think I mean to insult them,” cried Fleury. “That’s the very last thing I want to do. It’s just that we must change the direction of our society before it’s too late and we all become like these engines which will soon be galloping across India on railway lines. An engine has no heart!”

“Keep still!” Hari, watch in hand, snatched the cap off the lens and by the look on his face he might have been wishing it was the muzzle of a cannon that was pointing at Fleury.

“Oh dear!” thought Fleury, “I seem to have offended him somehow.”

Hari counted off two minutes, replaced the lens cap, snatched out the plate and slipped it over the heated mercury bath. Fleury goggled at him, dismayed.

“I am very sad,” declared Hari with frosty dignity, “that you, Fleury, should reveal yourself so frightfully backward.”

He shook his head over the mercury bath with lofty distress. “This will be portrait of very backward man indeed, I am very much regretting to say.”

A discouraged silence fell between the two young men as they waited for the fine mercury globules to settle on the parts of the plate which had been affected by light. When this process had been accomplished Hari picked the plate up with a pair of pliers and poured over it a solution of hyposulphite of soda to wash off the unchanged iodide and make the image permanent; then, still holding it with pliers he washed it with a solution of gold chloride to increase the brilliance of the image. All that now remained to be done was to wash the plate in water, dry it over the spirit lamp, and put it into a frame behind glass for the image was as delicate as the wing of a butterfly and as easily harmed. This done, Hari sighed and took it over to show Fleury, whose head was still clamped in the ring. Hari’s anger had given way to sadness and disapproval.

“It looks as if it has been drawn by the brush of the fairy queen Mab,” said Fleury, hoping that this conceit would soothe Hari’s wounded feelings.

“It is the portrait of a very backward man indeed,” replied Hari severely. And with that he turned and trudged out of the room with heavy steps, leaving Fleury to free himself from the clamps as best he could.

6

The river which flowed, when there was any water in it, past the Maharajah’s palace to wander here and there on the vast and empty plain passed alongside the cantonment and the now yellow lawns of the Residency, beneath the iron bridge, along the native town (which had been built, unlike the cantonment mainly on the western bank so that the devout would be facing the rising sun as they stood on the steps of the bathing *ghat*), past the burning *ghat*, and out on to the plain again, reaching at long last, some eight miles from Krishnapur, a stretch of half a mile where it ran between embankments. At this point the plain ceased to be quite flat. There was a slight depression in it of four or five miles in circumference, made by the footprint of one of the giant gods who had strode back and forth across India in prehistoric times settling their disputes and hurling pieces of the continent at one another. The land was particularly fertile here, either because it had been blessed by the footprint, as the Hindus believed, or, as the British believed, because it was regularly flooded and coated with a nourishing silt.

This flooding, though, was a nuisance and it grew worse every year because of the attrition of the embankments. Cattle were drowned and crops lost. To stop the flooding by reinforcing the embankments was the great ambition of both the Collector and the Magistrate. While the Collector had been visiting the opium factory the Magistrate, accompanied by his bearer, Abdallah, had ridden out of Krishnapur to visit the embankments and consult the landowners whose coolies would be needed for the work of reinforcement. Why go to so much trouble when the river could be persuaded not to flood by the sacrifice of a black goat on its banks, the landowners had wanted to know.

“But that doesn’t work. You’ve tried it before. Every year the floods are worse.”

The landowners remained silent out of polite amazement that anybody could be so stupid as to doubt the efficacy of a sacrifice when properly performed by Brahmins. They were torn between amusement and distress at such obtuseness.

“The *Sircar* will make you supply labour,” declared the Magistrate at last, but he knew that the Government could do no such thing in the present state of the country, and the landowners knew that he knew. The hollowness of this threat embarrassed them. To spare the Magistrate’s feelings they feigned expressions of sorrow, alarm, of despair at the prospect of this coercion...but when the Magistrate had at last ridden away, though not before he was out of earshot, they shouted with laughter, held their sides, and even rolled in the dust in undignified glee. Their glee redoubled when soon after the Magistrate’s departure they heard that there had been a massacre of the *feringhees* at Captainganj. Then an argument broke out which began playfully but soon became serious, involving prestige. The argument was this: would the Magistrate get back to Krishnapur alive or would he be killed on the way?

The Magistrate and Abdallah (who, although he enjoyed seeing Mr Willoughby discomfited, was saddened that it should be Hindus who gained an advantage over him) rode slowly back to the cantonment. The Magistrate ignored the heat of the sun which beat down on his pith helmet and touched off his blazing ginger whiskers. How he hated stupidity and ignorance! He hoped that the river, when it broke its banks again this year, would drown the stupid men he had just been talking to...but he knew that this was not likely: when disasters occur it is only the poor who suffer. Abdallah wanted to cheer up the Magistrate by telling him a Mohammedan joke against the Hindus.

“Sahib, why are the crocodiles in Krishnapur so fat?” The Magistrate rode on without answering.

“Because they eat up all the sins which Hindus wash off in the river!” And Abdallah laughed loudly so that Mr Willoughby would know that it was a joke.

Later in the afternoon the Collector and the Magistrate sat together in the Collector’s study and the Magistrate described the result of his journey. By now it was the late afternoon. When he had finished both

men sat in discouraged silence. The Collector was thinking: “Even after all these years in India Willoughby doesn’t understand the natives. He’s too rational for them. He can’t see things from their point of view because he has no heart. If I had been there they would have listened to me.” Aloud he said: “The river will have to flood again this year then, Tom. But immediately the flooding is over we’ll tackle the embankments before they have time to forget that their wretched black goat didn’t work.”

The study was the Collector’s favourite room; it was panelled in teak and contained many beloved objects. The most important of these was undoubtedly *The Spirit of Science Conquers Ignorance and Prejudice*, a bas-relief in marble by the window; it was here that the angle of the light gave most life to the brutish expression of Ignorance at the moment of being disembowelled by Truth’s sabre, and yet emphasised at the same time how hopelessly Prejudice, on the point of throwing a net over Truth, had become enmeshed in its own toils. There was another piece of sculpture beside his desk: *Innocence Protected by Fidelity* by Benzoni, representing a scantily clothed young girl asleep with a garland of flowers in her lap; beside her a dog had its paw on the neck of a gagging snake which had been about to bite her.

Yet Art did not hold sway alone in the Collector’s study for on one corner of the desk in front of him there stood a tribute to scientific invention; he had come across it during those ecstatic summer days, now as remote as a dream, which he had spent in the Crystal Palace. It was the model of a carriage which supplied its own railway, laying it down as it advanced and taking it up again after the wheels had passed over. So ingenious had this invention seemed to the Collector, such was the enthusiasm it had excited at the Exhibition, that he could not fathom why six years should have passed away without one seeing these machines crawling about everywhere.

Beside the model carriage stood another ingenious invention, a drinking glass with compartments for soda and acid following separate channels; the idea was that the junction of the two streams should come just at the moment of entering the mouth, causing effervescence. The Collector had only once attempted to use it; all the same, he admired its ingenuity and had grown fond of it, as an object. “The trouble with poor Willoughby,” he mused now, surreptitiously observing the face of his companion and noting, as far as the now cinnamon whiskers permitted, how it was raked, harrowed, even ploughed up by free-thinking and cynicism, “is that he’s not a whole man, as I am...For science and reason is not enough. A man must also have a heart and be capable of understanding the beauties of art and literature. What a narrow range the man has!” The Collector’s mood of self-satisfaction, which had been brought on by his agreeable conversation with the pretty Mrs Lang, deepened as he strolled to the window and saw the mosque three or four hundred yards away, for the mosque was a perfect example of what was right with himself and wrong with the Magistrate.

The Magistrate had argued that if there was going to be trouble it could not be allowed to remain there...its narrow windows commanded the Residency completely; beside it stood some mud hovels which were less of a problem: a few well-aimed shot should reduce them to powder which the next breeze would blow away. What the Magistrate in the blindness of his rationalism failed to appreciate was the spiritual importance of the mosque; the Mohammedans would be outraged if it were demolished and with every justification. The Collector could not afford to alienate the Mohammedans, who were generally considered to be the most loyal section of the native population, and besides, a member of a civilized society does not go around knocking down places of worship, even those belonging to a different faith from his own. The Collector frowned, annoyed with himself. He should have thought of the second reason first.

“He surely can’t be paying us another visit already,” grumbled the Magistrate, unaware of the unfavourable judgement which had been passed on his character a few moments earlier in the Collector’s mind.

At the window they both listened to the familiar thud of hoofs and jingle of harness which announced the arrival of the General and his *sowars* from Captainganj.

“Damn the fellow!” sighed the Collector. “I expect he’s come to sneer at my ramparts again.” But even as he spoke he saw the cluster of riders rein up in front of the Residency and realized that something was amiss. The General, instead of waiting to be lifted, had plunged forward over the horse’s head and slithered to the ground. And there he continued to lie until the *sowars* came to pick him up. But the glare even at this time of day was still so intense that the Collector, looking out from the semi-darkness of his study, could not be sure that he had actually seen what he had just seen...The sudden shouting and commotion that echoed immediately afterwards from the hall left him in little doubt, however.

As he stepped outside on to the portico the light and heat smote him, causing him to falter and put a hand on the wrought-iron railing, which he snatched away instantly, his fingers seared. He waited at the top of the stairs and watched then, as the *sowars* came towards him carrying the General. Blood was running freely from the General’s body and splashing audibly on to the baked earth. The *sowars* were evidently trying to stop the flowing of blood by holding him first one way, then another, as someone eating toast and honey might try, by vigilance and dexterity, to prevent it dripping. The General’s blood continued to patter on the earth, however, and all the way up the steps and into the hall where he was laid down at last, after some hesitation, on a rather expensive carpet.

Even when he had at last succeeded in freeing himself from the metal clamps Fleury was by no means sure how to find his way back to the room where he had left Harry stretched on the floor. He started tentatively

through a dim series of naked, malodorous chambers; his head was still singing from the combined effect of the clamps and the mercury fumes. Presently he came to the end of the connecting rooms and was faced with a crumbling staircase. He climbed it impatiently and found himself in another chamber as empty as the one he had just left. The air was better here, however, and there were a number of windows screened by intricately carved marble...in one corner of the ceiling there was the bulging, basket-like growth of a bee's nest. Beyond the window was a verandah, part of which was shaded by lattice curtains and here a number of the Maharajah's servants were drowsing on charpoys in a long row like the Forty Thieves, their liveries piled untidily beside them. They paid no attention to Fleury as he passed.

The heat and glare were stupendous; the countryside lay motionless in the grip of heat and light and somehow it had taken on the appearance of an Arctic landscape. From where he stood there was nothing but white or grey to be seen: there was the same dim, lurid sky, beneath which clouds of dust resembled driving snow. Returning his eyes to the shade of the verandah Fleury continued to see a grove of leafless *sal* trees imprinted on his retina like the bars of a glowing furnace.

He heard the sound of rapid footsteps and turning the next corner almost collided with Harry Dunstaple who demanded: "Where on earth have you been? I've been looking for you everywhere. There's been a disturbance at Captainganj and Father sent his *sais* with a message to warn us...We must get back to the cantonment immediately."

Over Harry's shoulder Fleury saw the Prime Minister hastening towards them. In spite of the physical effort he was making his face still wore an expressionless, introverted look.

"The blighter's been following me everywhere," Harry muttered with exasperation. "I've no idea what he wants. *Go away* !" he added loudly as the Prime Minister scampered up.

"I think he was told to keep an eye on you in case your illness got worse. How are you feeling, by the way?"

"Oh, right as rain." But Harry's face was still pale and beaded with sweat, nevertheless. "Where's His Highness? We must leave immediately."

The sepoys had mutinied and attacked their officers on parade, Harry explained as they set off to find the courtyard where the *sais* was waiting with horses for them. Nobody knew yet how serious it was. "It's damnable," he added. "I came out here without a pistol." And Fleury realized from the tone of his voice that Harry, finding himself unarmed, was suffering not from fear but from disappointment. Here was a possibility of some action at last and he was going to miss it!

With Harry aggressively striding out in the lead they clattered rapidly through another series of chambers, empty except for an occasional servant asleep on the floor. There was no sign either of Hari or of the Maharajah, but the Prime Minister continued to dodge along introvertedly behind them. They came at last, by a stroke of luck, to the door by which they had originally entered the palace. Stepping outside, they were again struck by an oven-draught of hot air.

The *sais* who had come to warn them was now asleep in the shade of the wall and it took some moments to rouse him. The Prime Minister, his sacred thread just visible beneath his frock coat, squatted mutely on his heels at a distance and observed them in an impartial manner. He was still sitting there when at last they rode away. As the sun shone fully on Harry's scarlet tunic, which he had re-buttoned in readiness for any military engagements which might present themselves, its colour intensified until it was almost impossible to look at with the naked eye. Then they were cantering through the outer gates where the Maharajah's army, on which the Collector had earlier been pinning some hopes, still seemed to be in a state of repose, very much as it had been earlier.

7

Picture a map of India as big as a tennis court with two or three hedgehogs crawling over it...each hedgehog might represent one of the dust-storms which during the summer wander aimlessly here and there over the Indian plains, whirling countless tons of dust into the atmosphere as they go...until the monsoon rolls in and squashes them flat. Because there was a dust-storm in the vicinity it seemed, and was, much darker than usual. This darkness could not help but be associated with the terrible massacre at Captainganj; even the Collector, who had gone up on to the roof to be alone and had found the stars blotted out, caught himself thinking so.

Harry and Fleury had spent the late afternoon riding about the country warning indigo planters to come into the Residency. When they returned to the cantonment for the second time they found their way obstructed by abandoned carriages and hackeries; such a panic had taken place that the road to the Residency had become jammed with vehicles and people had been obliged to continue on foot, bringing what possessions they could with them or having them carried by coolies on their heads.

In the darkness of the Residency drive, which was lit only by a flaring torch on the portico, the silhouettes of men and horses thrashed and wrestled with boxes, bundles, and mysterious unnameable objects which they clung to with desperate tenacity; it was as if they were struggling up to their waists through a swamp of pitch towards the solitary, dancing flame of the Residency. Curiously enough, they struggled in almost total silence

except for laboured breathing and an occasional strained whisper.

Those who managed to win through this slough of darkness and despair found themselves in the hall, which more resembled purgatory than Heaven, and was crowded with ladies and children who sat huddled on trunks and boxes. They stared about them with that wide-eyed, alert look which people have during emergencies but which is really the result of shock; if you spoke to one of these alert-looking ladies she would have difficulty understanding you.

Almost five hours had passed since the General had dived bleeding from his horse, thereby conceding the weakness of his arguments. During this time the Collector had hardly for a moment stopped giving orders. At first he had found it difficult because the refugees were stunned; even when he shouted no one paid any attention to him. So he had changed his tactics: he had assembled all the young lieutenants and ensigns who had managed to escape unhurt from Captainganj (for once the senior officers had borne the brunt of the slaughter) together with half a dozen civilian officials. With this retinue at his heels he had stalked about the Residency doing his best to impose order on chaos, organizing a skeleton defence for the "mud walls", allocating rooms for the women and children, sending out parties of loyal Sikhs to patrol the cantonment. All these orders he murmured to the dazed young men around him and, curiously enough, the quieter his tone, the more greedily his orders were swallowed and the more hastily executed. Soon he was barely whispering his commands.

Now, on the roof, all was quiet except for that laboured breathing, the crunching of gravel and the creaking of wheels that filtered up from the struggling mass in the darkness below. The Collector cursed them silently. Why had they to bring their useless possessions? Already the rooms and corridors of the Residency were shrinking with the deposit of furniture, boxes, and bric à brac. He knew now that he should have forbidden everything except food and weapons...but in their place, ah, could he have brought himself to leave behind his statues, his paintings, his inventions?

On his way to the roof he had looked into his bedroom. The General lay in a coma in the dressing-room; his whistling breath could be heard through the half open door and the Collector could just glimpse the nimbus of mosquito net which enveloped him. Miriam and Louise Dunstaple were watching together beside his cot now that Dr Dunstaple had gone to aid Dr McNab in treating the other wounded who had escaped from Captainganj.

Presently the stars began to appear and the night became brighter. Some time later, the Magistrate joined him on the roof.

"Thank heavens they got away with some cannons, Tom," said the Collector.

The Magistrate made no reply except to sigh and peer over the balustrade at the seething mass of men and possessions below. It was evident that he did not think that cannons would make any difference. Nevertheless, enough men had escaped from Captainganj to make a useful force. Two dozen British officers of native regiments, twice that number of English private soldiers, and the majority of the Sikh cavalry, numbering over eighty men; add to that at least a hundred European civilians, either Company officials or planters and, finally, a large but as yet undetermined number of Eurasians. Perhaps there would also be a handful of loyal sepoys. But all the same the Magistrate was right: against the vast numbers that the rebel sepoys were capable of marshalling the Residency force was insignificant.

Now the moon rose and other gentlemen began to appear on the roof. Among the first was Dr Dunstaple who seemed in surprisingly good spirits and was anxious to tell the Collector an amusing story about Dr McNab. An hour or two earlier, while the two doctors had been working together to sew up a young ensign, McNab had suddenly asked him if he had heard of the native way to staunch wounds...a way which he was, he said, eager to try out for himself. "'And what's that, McNab?' says I. 'It's this,' says he..." and here, although McNab had barely a trace of Scottish accent, Dr Dunstaple set himself to imitate him in an exaggerated and amusing way. "'Hae ye no hairrd o' burtunga ants, Dunstaple?' 'As a matter of fact, McNab,' says I, 'I cannot say that I have ever heard burtunga ants mentioned in the entire course of my existence.' 'Och, then, lesten to this, laddie,' says he. It seems that the little beggars have large and powerful jaws. What you have to do, he tells me, is to press together the lips of the wound and place the ants on it at intervals. They bite immediately. The necks are then snipped off and the bodies fall to the ground leaving the edges of the wound firmly held by the heads and jaws. 'Och, Dunstaple, I hae foond me a naist o' the wee baisties and I shall see for maeself ere long.'" And Dr Dunstaple laughed heartily at the thought and repeated: "Hae ye no hairrd o' burtunga ants, Dunstaple?"

When Harry Dunstaple and Fleury came up on to the roof the Doctor, failing to notice that neither the Collector nor the Magistrate were enjoying it, insisted on repeating the anecdote about McNab, adding that all the time Ensign Smith had been listening with his face as grey as porridge, expecting McNab to produce his ants then and there. It was something for Fleury to put in his book about Progress, he chuckled...the strides that medicine was making in India.

By this time Fleury and Harry, though each still considered himself privately to have nothing in common with the other, had become firm friends. It so happened that they had had an adventure together; they had had to ride all the way back to Krishnapur unarmed through mutinous countryside and then the Collector had sent them out again to warn indigo farmers...and at one point they had heard what had sounded mighty like a musket shot which, although not *very* near, might or might not have been fired in their direction but, they

decided, probably *had* been. Harry clung to this adventure, such as it was, all the more tenaciously when he found that because of his sprained wrist he had missed an adventure at Captainganj.

Those of his peers who had escaped with life and limb from the Captainganj parade ground did not seem to be thinking of it as an adventure, those who had managed to escape unhurt were now looking tired and shocked. And they seemed to be having trouble telling Harry what it had been like. Each of them simply had two or three terrible scenes printed on his mind: an Englishwoman trying to say something to him with her throat cut, or a comrade spinning down into a whirl-pool of hacking sepoys, something of that sort. To make things worse, one kept finding oneself about to say something to a friend who was not there to hear it any more. It was hard to make any sense out of what had happened, and after a while they gave up trying. Of the score of subalterns who had managed to escape, the majority had never seen a dead person before...a dead English person, anyway...one occasionally bumped into a dead native here and there but that was not quite the same. Strangely enough, they listened quite enviously to Harry talking about the musket shot which had "almost definitely" been fired at himself and Fleury. They wished they had had an adventure too, instead of their involuntary glimpse of the abattoir.

It was much cooler on the roof. The moon hung, soft and brilliant, above the cantonment trees and the dust in the atmosphere caused it to shine with a curious dream-like radiance which Fleury had never seen before outside India. In its light he could make out figures huddled on bedding, for a number of gentlemen had found it too hot to sleep without punkahs in the interior of the building and had come up here. Others were standing and talking together in low tones. Presently the Padre's voice rose above them, reciting the Prayer in Time of Wars and Tumults..."Save and deliver us we humbly beseech thee, from the hands of our enemies; abate their pride, assuage their malice and confound their devices; that we, being armed with thy defence, may be preserved ever more from all perils, to glorify thee, who art the only giver of victory..."

A weird, melancholy cry started up now, echoing over the moonlit hedges and tamarinds and spreading like a widening ripple over the dark cantonment. Beside Fleury, the Magistrate said: "Listen to the jackals...The natives say that if you listen carefully you hear the leader calling ' *Soopna men raja hooa...*' which means 'I am the king in the night'...and then the other jackals reply: ' *Hooa! hooa! hooa!*' 'You are! you are! you are!'" Fleury could make out nothing at first, but later, as he was falling asleep it seemed to him that he could, after all, hear these very words. Below, the last refugees had now struggled out of the darkness with their burdens and all was quiet. At last Fleury fell asleep, and as he slept, a fiery beacon lit up the cantonment, and then another, and another.

The Collector awoke to a pleasant smell of wood-smoke, which for some reason reminded him of Northumberland where he had spent his childhood. He had slept in his clothes, of course, and had woken once or twice as people came through his bedroom to attend to the General. He had had a nightmare, too, in which he had found himself struggling to free himself from a stifling presence that had wrapped itself round him like a shroud. But he had slept well, on the whole, and felt refreshed. He had Miriam to thank for that because, while watching by the General's beside she had made it her business politely to discourage all those who wanted to wake the Collector to tell him that the cantonment was burning, as if there was anything he could do about it. As soon as he was properly awake, however, she told him what the pleasant smell was.

In any case, it was by no means the whole cantonment which had burned; the watchers on the roof had only counted five or six different fires, and the majority of these were of already deserted bungalows, inhabited only by the ghosts of magnificent company officials. The other bungalows still for the most part had their servants to protect them, however tepidly. More important, the sepoys were still at Captainganj, arguing among themselves as to whether it would be best to sack the cantonment or to march straight to Delhi to restore the Emperor. It was said that the sepoys were also sending a horseman to Saint Petersburg to acquire the assistance of the King of Russia whom they believed would be sympathetic to their cause.

Before the morning grew too hot the Collector summoned the Magistrate to the roof to plan the defence of the enclave. The Residency was the most solid as well as the most imposing building in the cantonment. It stood, together with Dr Dunstaple's house, the Church and the Cutcherry, in a compound of several acres which was roughly three-sided. Against one of these three sides the native town abutted in the shape of a handful of not very substantial mud houses and, of course, of the mosque which the Magistrate, blinded by rationalism, had been so anxious to destroy.

"We'll establish a battery in the flowerbeds down there to protect us against attack from the native town," said the Collector. He saw the Magistrate shift his gaze to the mosque and knew what he was thinking. He himself, as it happened, was coming to see the mosque less as a sign of his own largeness of mind than as a source of trouble to the cannons in the flower-beds. However, the Magistrate made no comment and together they crossed the roof. From here they could see the cantonment spread out in the shape of a fan, roughly bisected by the Mall, where in peaceful times Europeans took their evening stroll; anywhere else it was considered undignified to be seen on foot. The line of tamarinds which gave it shade came to an end on the far side of the cantonment at the old parade ground, long since abandoned, perhaps fortunately, for a better site at Captainganj.

"Tom, I want you to pick the men you need and establish a battery behind the Cutcherry rampart. You'll

command it with Lieutenant Peterson to advise you. We'll need another battery in front of Dunstaple's house. I intend to put Lieutenant Cutter in charge there. At the ramparts in between the batteries we'll establish pickets every few yards with rifles and bayonets. In the meantime we must do what we can to build them up higher."

"What about the river?"

Again they crossed the roof. Below them the barren lawns stretched away towards the river; on its far bank lay melon beds, rich green contrasting pleasantly in that glaring landscape of whites and greys with the bright yellow of the melons. These melons, the Collector knew, were only eaten by the very poorest natives in Krishnapur and by one other person, namely the Magistrate himself who during the hot weather liked to scoop out the pips, pour in a bottle of claret, and then dip his ginger whiskers into the cool mixture of wine and juice. "A sad example," thought the Collector with pity, "of the eccentricity to which men living by themselves are subject. Thank heaven that I myself have been spared such peculiar habits."

Aloud he said, "An attack from this direction isn't likely in my opinion. The ground beyond the ramparts is open for quite a distance. The only cover is the near bank of the river and that must be a good three hundred yards away. On the far bank the ground rises and they can't approach unobserved. But above all there's the banqueting hall. They'd be mad to attack that."

The banqueting hall stood on a rise in the ground which corresponded to the hill beyond the melon beds. It was a solid building, not much used any longer. In design it was an unhappy mixture of Greek and gothic; the six pillars of its façade were an echo of the six imposing pillars of its illustrious parent, East India House in Leadenhall Street. Inside there was wood panelling, a great baronial fireplace complete with inglenooks, and even a minstrel gallery. It possessed stained-glass windows, too, but perhaps the most surprising pieces of ornament were outside, the four giant marble busts of Greek philosophers which gazed out over the plain from each corner of the roof.

"They might attack there even so," said the Magistrate doubtfully.

"If they do, so much the better." Through modesty the Collector had failed to mention the final attribute which rendered the banqueting hall utterly impregnable, for it was here that he had allowed the books he was reading on fortification to influence the plan of his "mud walls". He had chosen the simple and traditional *tenaille* trace: a system of flanks and faces arranged something like the points of a star to cover each other so that, at least in theory, there was no angle at which the rampart might be attacked without the risk of cross-fire. Of course, once past the banqueting hall these elaborate fortifications petered out again into the same wandering line that followed the prickly pear of the compound wall and which might well be contemptuously dismissed by a military man as "mud walls".

"We'll put Major Hogan in charge to keep him quiet. And we'll give them a six-pounder, though I don't suppose they'll find much use for it. Now we'd better get down and set up those batteries while we still have the chance."

Major Hogan was a rather muddled and peppery old fellow who was generally considered to have been too long in the East. The garrison under his command was composed of Harry Dunstaple (relegated there until his wrist was properly mended), a couple of portly Sikhs, half a dozen very elderly native pensioners who had loyally presented themselves on hearing of the Company's difficulties, a taciturn man from the Salt Agency called Barlow and, lastly, Fleury. Major Hogan, as it happened, was the only officer over the rank of lieutenant to have survived the slaughter at Captainganj. He might have laid claim to the military command of the whole enclave but had not done so...Years had passed since he had last taken any serious interest in his profession.

Although disappointed to be posted to the safest place inside the enclave, Harry swallowed his feelings and set to work to improve the Collector's fortifications. Soon Fleury was hard at work too, sitting in the shade of a Greek pillar and directing the native pensioners who came tottering up from the river bed with boulders where to put them. But Fleury had little stamina and presently this tedious job became too much for him; so he sauntered away in a rather unmilitary fashion. Harry would have reprimanded him, because one cannot have a soldier, even an amateur soldier like Fleury, leaving his post whenever he gets bored, but Harry had just received delivery of his six-pounder and could think of little else...it was made of brass and he had set his two Sikhs to polishing it. Brass cannons are lighter than iron but gunners who knew their business, like Harry, preferred them because they were less likely to burst. But brass does have a disadvantage, too. If a great number of shots are fired the muzzle becomes distorted into an ellipse from the shot constantly hammering upwards against its rim, and then loading becomes difficult or impossible. But several hundred shots would have to be fired before this happened, which would take weeks or months of siege warfare...and there was no question of the garrison at Krishnapur having to hold out for more than a few days, while help was sent from Barrackpur or Dinapur. So Harry had no need to worry about that.

Fleury had wandered over to the Residency hoping to find someone to have a chat with, perhaps even Louise if he were lucky...but everything was in turmoil. All the men were working in a frenzy to throw more earth on to the ramparts before the sepoys had a chance to attack...they did not even appear to *see* Fleury standing there amiably in his Tweedside lounging jacket. And where the women were, heaven only

knew...though he would not have been surprised to learn that they were organizing something else, somewhere else. Fleury wandered away, feeling unwanted. At the Church, there was more feverish activity; a difference of opinion was taking place because the Collector had ordered food, powder and shot to be stored in the Church; the Padre and some members of his congregation were entertaining serious doubts about the propriety of this. But while the more spiritual were entertaining doubts, the military were shifting the stores. Fleury watched the great earthenware jars containing grain, rice, flour and sugar being carried into the Church and arranged in rows at the back.

When he returned to the banqueting hall he found Harry behaving rather oddly. He was gazing in a trance at the brass cannon and running his fingers over its soft, hairless, metal skin. It might have been a naked young girl the way Harry was looking at it. He gave a start when he heard Fleury approach, however, and slapped the chase in a more manly fashion.

"Look here, Harry, you must tell me all about cannons. To begin with, what's this thing like a door-knob on the end for?"

"That's the cascable," muttered Harry, taken aback. He could see that Fleury was not going to be such a success as he had hoped.

"Sometimes, Tom, I wonder that I am not an atheist myself!"

It was the Collector who had uttered this heartfelt cry. He and the Magistrate were standing in the vernacular record room of the Cutcherry; from outside there came the steady clinking of spades as a detachment of English private soldiers, the remainder of the General's "odds and ends" on their way to Umballa, threw gravel against the outer wall.

The Collector was displeased; he had just had to arbitrate a dispute over the graveyard between the Padre and the Roman Catholic chaplain, Father O'Hara. A small portion of the graveyard had been reluctantly allotted to Father O'Hara by the Padre for his Romish rites in the event of any of the half dozen members of his Church succumbing during the present difficulties. But when Father O'Hara had asked for a bigger plot, the Padre had been furious; Father O'Hara already had enough room for six people, so he must be secretly hoping to convert some of the Padre's own flock to his Popish idolatry. The Collector had settled the dispute by saying with asperity: "In any case, nobody's dead yet. We'll talk about it again when you can show me the bodies."

The vernacular record room, which had a surprisingly cheerful appearance, was the very centre of the British administration in Krishnapur and as such was the object of the Magistrate's scientific scrutiny. He had come to see this room as an experimental greenhouse in which he watched with interest, but without emotion, as an occasional green shoot of intelligence was blighted by administrative stupidity, or by ignorance, or by the prejudices of the natives.

As a matter of fact, it even looked like a greenhouse. Its walls were lined from floor to ceiling with tier over tier of stone shelves; to protect the records from white ants they were tied up in bundles of cotton cloth brilliantly dyed in different colours for ease of reference...and these bright colours gave the shelves the gay appearance of flowerbeds. This cloth protection, however, was not always effective and sometimes when he opened a bundle the Magistrate would find himself looking, not at the document he required, but at a little heap of powdery earth. And then he would give a shout of bitter laughter which echoed across the compound and had more than once caused the Collector to raise his eyebrows, fearful for his sanity. In India all official proceedings, even the most trivial, were conducted in writing, and so the rapidity with which the piles of paper grew was alarming and ludicrous. The Magistrate was constantly having to order extensions to be made to his laboratory. Sometimes, when tired, he no longer saw it as an experimental greenhouse but instead as an animal of masonry that crept steadily forward over the earth, swallowing documents as it went.

The Collector, his splendid ruff of whiskers standing out clearly against a bank of yellow bundles, was looking at the Magistrate in a moody, persecuted sort of way. The Magistrate himself was standing with his head against a bank of cinnamon-coloured documents which so nearly matched the colour of his own hair and whiskers that for a moment it seemed as if his eyes, nose and ears were floating disembodied above the morning coat. He knew what the Collector was feeling persecuted about and could not resist persecuting him a little more, thinking with relish: "His high-mindedness could hardly be expected to survive the pressure of circumstances." He enquired innocently: "How about the mosque?"

The Collector winced. "The Engineers are going to knock it down presently. We have a *futwah*, of course, but one still doesn't like to have to do it."

A *futwah*, or judgement, had been obtained from the Cazee in Krishnapur after tedious negotiations by messenger and in return for a promise of future favours. It sanctioned the demolition of the mosque on the strength of a precedent of the Emperor Alumgire; that pious monarch, while at war with the Mahrattas, had pulled down a mosque which sheltered them from his artillery...In that instance the doctors of the law had declared that the Almighty would pardon the removal of His temple for the destruction of His enemies. But at Krishnapur it was for the *protection*, not the destruction of unbelievers that the mosque was to be demolished. The Collector was not convinced by this precedent and doubted whether the Mohammedans would be very satisfied with it either, particularly as the Cazee was already letting it be known that the *futwah* had been

extorted from him. Yet even the dire risk of arousing Mohammedan resentment was not at the heart of the Collector's disquiet, for beside the practical reason, the question of resentment, there lay its moral shadow, the fact that a civilized man does not countenance the destruction of places of worship.

They had moved out now and were standing at the door of the Cutcherry. Some distance away, squinting into the glare, the Magistrate could make out Lieutenant Dunstaple and young Fleury talking together in the shade of a peepul tree with the wonderful enthusiasm and sincerity of youth (but which, reflected the Magistrate, can be a bit sickening if you have too much of it). But the Magistrate was, in any case, not interested in youth for the moment...he was more interested in the Collector's skull and character, and in the relationship between them. Indeed, he was perplexed. He had believed himself capable of reading that skull as easily as you or I would read a newspaper. But the fact remained that although the Collector's organ of Cautiousness seemed, according to his skull, to be unduly pronounced, he had not been behaving as if it were well developed at all. On the contrary, he had been behaving as if it were rudimentary, even atrophied. He had been making rapid decisions all day. It was very worrying.

The advance of science is not, the Magistrate knew, like a man crossing a river from one stepping-stone to another. It is much more like someone trying to grope his way forward through a London fog. Just occasionally, in a slight lifting of the fog, you can glimpse the truth, establish the location not only of where you are standing but also perhaps of the streets round about where the fog still persists. The wise scientist deliberately searches for such liftings of the fog because they allow him to fill in the map of his knowledge by confirming it. The Magistrate knew that to prove the truth of his phrenological beliefs he must find a person who, unlike the Collector, was subject to *one powerful propensity only*, which could then be verified beyond dispute by the development of the skull. The Collector was too difficult a case; the fog of ambiguity, of counter-active organs, clung too thickly round his head.

The sight of Harry not far away reminded the Collector of something as he stood at the Cutcherry door...He must send young Dunstaple for the "fallen woman" in the *dak*. In all the fuss of the past twenty-four hours nobody had thought to warn her and bring her in. It was probable, however, that she knew of the danger but was too conscious of her shame to show herself at the Residency. Still, she could not possibly stay where she was; a terrible fate lay in store for an unprotected Englishwoman, he did not doubt. Admittedly, it would be a problem having her in the Residency with the other ladies but there was nothing to be done about that. She must come in, no matter how greatly she had sinned.

The Collector had heard a little about her and was inclined to be charitable. She had come out to India as someone's "niece", a rather remotely connected "niece", one gathered. Calcutta was full of such "nieces"...girls who had come out from England sent by anyone who could scrape up an acquaintance with a respectable family in India, as members of "the fishing fleet" to find a husband. The war had taken such a toll of young men! Only in India was there still a plentiful supply to be found, because many young men had chosen India without necessarily intending to choose celibacy as well. Poor girl, it was probably not her fault. No doubt she would still make a good wife for some homesick young ensign willing to incur the disapproval of his colonel. He sighed. Now he must get back to work.

"We'll see what happens, in any case," he observed cryptically, and walked out into the sunlight. The Magistrate watched his head glow for a moment before a bearer sprang forward to protect it with the shade of a black umbrella. He too sighed. More than ever he longed to grasp the Collector's skull and make some exact measurements of it.

Now that the greatest heat of the day was over, the engineers were setting to work on the demolition of the mosque. Presently, the Collector found himself alone once more in his study. He stood near the window, one hand resting on the marble head of *Innocence Protected by Fidelity*. "It really wasn't altogether my fault," he suggested to himself hopefully.

A strange thing was happening to the mosque; a golden cloud had begun to spread outwards from its walls into the still air. Gradually the cloud darkened and spread into a thick cloak of dust that completely masked the building from the Collector's troubled eyes, as if to protect him from the evidence of his own barbarity.

While the Collector was observing the slow demolition of the mosque Harry Dunstaple, attended by Fleury and a couple of Sikh *sowars*, had gone to rescue the "fallen woman" from the *dak* bungalow...this was exactly the sort of daring and noble enterprise that appealed to the two young men's imaginations, rescuing girls at the gallop was very much their cup of tea, they thought.

The difficulty about the *dak* was that it had not been built, as it should have been, in the cantonment but in the middle of the native town, which made the expedition dangerous. To make matters worse the sun was setting; they had to hurry lest they be caught in the native town after nightfall. After the tranquillity of the cantonment the noisy crowds surging through the streets came as a shock to Fleury; as they penetrated deeper into the bazaar men shouted at them, words he could not understand, but they were plainly jeering. Their progress was constantly impeded by the crush; a perilously swaying cargo of Mohammedan women passed by on a camel, their masked heads turned towards Fleury; he felt himself stared at weirdly by their tiny, embroidered eye-holes.

" *Sahib. Yih achcha jagah nahin!*" one of the Sikhs said to him. "No good place, Sahib. Come quick." He was

leading them towards a short cut which would take them away from the principal road through the bazaar.

They plunged into a wilderness of dark and stinking streets, so narrow that there was hardly room for two people to pass each other. Their way led down flights of twisting steps and past shadowy doorways redolent of smoke, excrement and incense; sometimes the street narrowed to a mere slit between houses and once a massive, comatose Brahmin bull stumbled past them. Then, abruptly, they emerged from the stifling darkness into light and air. The *dak* bungalow lay beside them. While Fleury waited at the gate with the Sikhs Harry darted inside for the "fallen woman".

After a few minutes Harry emerged alone, looking perturbed, to confer with Fleury. The "fallen woman", whose name was Miss Hughes, was refusing to come. What on earth should he do? They could not possibly leave her alone for a second night without protection...And now, not content with refusing to come she was even thinking of killing herself again. Anyway, that is what she had *said* she was thinking of doing. She had implied that then he and all the others would not have to worry about her any longer. She might as well be dead, anyway, loathsome creature that she was, because *now*...(Harry had blushed at that "now" knowing only too well what it referred to)...because *now* she had nothing to live for. She had ruined herself.

"Nonsense!" Harry had declared gruffly. "You have a jolly great deal to live for."

"Just tell me one single thing!" And Miss Hughes had turned her tear-stained face, which was like that of a sensual little angel, towards Harry.

"Well...Any amount of things."

"What things?"

But Harry had been unable to think of anything. This was not the sort of thing he was good at. So he had dashed out to see if Fleury had any ideas. All this time the light was fading. To remain here after dark would be to invite disaster. So there was no time to lose. The two young men stared at each other in dismay.

"Tell her...tell her..." But Fleury, too, found himself baffled by this unexpected development. And it was not that his mind had gone completely blank, as Harry's had...because he could think of a number of ways for a dishonoured woman to spend the rest of her life...becoming a nun, good works to achieve redemption, that sort of thing. The trouble was that these did not sound to him like the sort of lives one could recommend to someone who thought she had nothing to live for; they sounded too uncomfortable for that.

But this was getting them nowhere. The Sikhs were beginning to roll their eyes ironically, and the horses were becoming restive too.

"Look here, tell her what a joy it is just to be alive. You know, the smell of new-mown hay, crystal mountain streams, the beauty of the setting sun, the laughter of little children...or rather, no...never mind the children...And, of course, you might also bring in the woman taken in adultery, the casting of first stones, Our Lord loving sinners and so forth."

"Wouldn't it be better if I stayed here and *you* spoke to Miss Hughes?" pleaded Harry.

"Certainly not. She knows you."

So Harry again hurried inside, his lips moving silently as he rehearsed Fleury's reasons for life being worth living. Outside, meanwhile, Fleury had to pretend not to notice that the Sikhs, their irony verging on impertinence, were ostentatiously saying goodbye to each other.

So it was that when Harry again emerged, distressed and still without Miss Hughes, it was less the fear of death in the native town than of appearing foolish in the eyes of the Sikhs, which caused the two young men to ride back to the Residency, leaving Miss Hughes to her fate. But they did not feel very pleased with themselves.

8

Days passed and still the sepoys made no decision to attack the Krishnapur cantonment. They moved out once, but after only a mile they stopped, engaged in disputes, and then moved back to Captainganj again. This movement of retreat caused some of the Europeans to hope that the affair might pass away without further bloodshed, but neither the Collector nor the Magistrate shared this optimism. A strange calm prevailed.

By acting as if the Company still retained some authority in the region, by staging a pantomime of administrative government to an empty theatre, the Collector had done his best to keep everything going as usual. But he found that all business in the courts and offices had ceased, except for the opium-eaters who came for the drug at the usual hour. There was another sign of this ominous calm, too, for the native sub-officers out in the district reported that crime had ceased altogether. The Collector remembered something he had once read...a Sanskrit poem describing how, in an overwhelmingly hot season, the cobra lay under the peacock's wing and the frog reclined beneath the hood of the cobra. So it must be, he thought, in Krishnapur, where all personal antagonism had been forgotten in the general feeling of expectation.

At the same time, however, as this sudden absence of crime was noticed, there was evidence of unrest in the native town. Merchants had latticed up the fronts of their shops with bamboo hurdles to protect them against the looting which they evidently expected. The wealthier merchants had even hired small armies of mercenaries to protect their property. These men, armed with swords and *lâtees*, were to be seen swaggering about the streets in various uniforms of their own confection, shouting with laughter if they saw a European

and boasting that they were now the masters.

The Collector was grateful for the days of respite. He knew that if the sepoys had attacked immediately after the mutiny at Captainganj they would have had little chance of defending themselves in the Residency. For the past few days everyone had been working to make the defences solid. It was true that some of the ladies were becoming bad-tempered and disconsolate from the heat, from the absence of active punkahs (the punkah-wallahs were vanishing one by one), and from the scarcity of *khus tatties*, the frames woven with fragrant grass over which water was thrown in order to cool the air during the hot weather. But on the whole the community had worked together, frantically and with a common purpose, until now order prevailed where there had only been confusion before. And the Collector thought admiringly of that observation hive of bees they had had in the Crystal Palace. What fine little beasts bees were!

He was standing in his bedroom with one elbow on the chimney piece as he mused on the qualities of bees. But suddenly it occurred to him that he could no longer hear the General's whistling breath from the adjoining dressing-room. This breath had grown daily less audible...yet how tenaciously the old General had been fighting to survive! Dr Dunstaple proclaimed it a miracle that he should have lasted so long.

The Collector was moving towards the dressing-room where Louise was watching by the General's bedside, when he heard another noise coming from outside in the compound, a strange, resonant murmur, a humming sound which slowly grew in volume until it reverberated everywhere, and which sounded, by an odd coincidence with his reflections of a moment earlier, not unlike the sound of bees about to swarm. As he hesitated a bearer knocked and came in with a message from the Magistrate, asking him to come immediately to the Cutcherry.

Outside the offices the Collector found the explanation for the resonant humming he had heard. A crowd of Eurasians and native Christians had assembled with bundles of bedding and other possessions loaded on to hackeries or balanced on their heads; the noise came from their humming, a sound like that made by the native infantry when striking camp, combined with a high-pitched wail of discontent.

The Magistrate, looking harassed, was sitting at his desk. From the wall the portrait of the young Queen surveyed her two subjects with bulging blue eyes.

"What on earth is the matter with them?"

"They want to come into the enclave. They say they're loyal to the Company and that as Christians they'll certainly be murdered by the sepoys. They're probably right, at that." Noting the look of dismay on the Collector's face he added: "I know, but what can we possibly do? I suppose we could take in the Eurasians at a pinch but we can't possibly have any more native Christians...We have more than enough as it is. We haven't enough food."

"We can't just leave them out there to be massacred, for Heaven's sake!" cried the Collector, who had turned pale and was groping for a chair. The Magistrate was taken aback by the Collector's show of emotion. He said: "I'm sorry, but we won't be able to stand a siege for any time at all if we have to feed such a crowd. Of course, it's up to you to decide, but I can't recommend you to take them in."

"Is there nothing we can do?"

"We'll take in the 'crannies', if you like...They would be the most in danger, anyway. All I can suggest for the native Christians is that we give each of them a certificate to say that they've been loyal to the Government, for when these difficulties are over. They can be rewarded afterwards."

"A fat lot of good a certificate will be!" groaned the Collector, but there was no alternative that he could see. He stayed for an hour in the Cutcherry helping the Magistrate to sign and issue the certificates. All the time he remained there the high-pitched, resonant humming did not cease for a moment.

It was only as he was walking back to the Residency that he remembered the General and summoned a bearer, telling him to go and enquire how the General was. The bearer, however, did not move. Instead, he replied quietly that it was unnecessary...He had just heard...he dropped his eyes and after a moment's hesitation murmured..."... *is dunniah fänê sā; rehlat keah*" (that his spirit had begun its march from this transitory world).

It was about noon that the General died. The humming of the native Christians was the only sound to break the silence. As the afternoon wore on, the humming was silenced by the great heat; all living creatures were obliged to crawl into some shade in order to survive. For a while the silence now became profound at the Residency, as it did every afternoon. Besides, there was nothing further for the garrison to do; by now they had made their defences as secure as was possible in the circumstances. The ladies, having fought polite but ruthless battles for a place under those punkahs in the billiard room that were still moving (that is to say, those which still had a native attached to the other end), lay stretched out on charpoys and mattresses in their chemises and petticoats like arrangements of wilted flowers, their faces, necks, and arms shining with perspiration. Flies and mosquitoes tormented them and they longed for the evening which would bring, if not coolness, at least a fall in the temperature.

About three o'clock the deathly silence was broken by a terrible noise of banging and hammering which startled them awake. It was the native carpenters knocking together a coffin for the General. The Padre was to bury him that evening. Towards four o'clock, when the heat had at last begun to die down a little, the

aggrieved humming started up again. This time it came from a little further away...from outside the Residency gates, where the native Christians had been moved, each holding his certificate of loyalty to the Company.

The Padre, too, was distressed by this humming. He had complained to the Collector about the Christians being left outside, just as he had complained about the storing of great jars of grain and powder at the back of the Church, but it had done no good. The Collector had been polite and soothing, but he stubbornly continued to ignore the Padre's demands.

The Padre was dismayed that his authority, which ought to have increased at this time of danger, had instead melted away. Even on the day following the disaster at Captainganj when he had taken the Sunday evening service in the expectation, at such a critical time, of finding it full to capacity, he had found himself with a congregation of a mere half dozen, all ladies.

He had intended beforehand, picturing to himself a large and anxious congregation, to preach a comforting sermon on a text from the Psalms: "It is better to trust in the Lord than to put any confidence in man. It is better to trust in the Lord than to put any confidence in princes." But seeing that mere handful of worshippers in the empty, echoing Church, he had been seized by righteous anger and had preached instead on the theme: "Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature."

He had heard, he declared, that there were those in the British community who blamed their present perilous situation on the missionary activity of the Church. They blamed a colonel of a regiment at Barrackpur who had been preaching Christianity in the bazaar. They blamed Mr Tucker, the Judge at Fatehpur, for the piety which had made him have the Ten Commandments translated into the vernacular and chiselled on stones to be placed by the roadside...

"They blame the pale-faced Christian knight with the great Excalibur of Truth in his hand, who is cleaving right through all the most cherished fictions of Brahmanism...the literature of Bacon and Milton that is exciting a new appetite for Truth and Beauty...the exact sciences of the West with their clear, demonstrable facts and inevitable deductions which are putting to shame the physical errors of Hinduism.

"They blame the pious men who have circulated this missionary address to the more educated natives in our Presidency," cried the Padre, flourishing a pamphlet in the pulpit, "demonstrating that our European civilization, which is rapidly uniting all the nations of the earth by means of railways, steam-vessels and the Electric Telegraph, is the forerunner of an inevitable absorption of all other faiths into the One Faith of the white ruler. They blame these devoted men for daring to suggest such a thing! They blame Lord Canning for giving a donation to the Baptist college at Srirampur and Lady Canning for visiting the female schools of Calcutta! They blame our most saintly men of God...and I ask you, brethren, for what sin do they blame them? They blame them for buying little native orphans during famines in order to bring them up in the true Way. Is this a crime? No, it is the service of Our Lord!

"Brethren, if our little community is now in peril it is because of *Sin*. The bad lives that are led by many of the Christians among us are a cause of discontent to Him...and make Him, who is above all, withdraw His protection. *Sin* is the one thing above all others which grieves Him... Sin is the thing which God most hates..."

The Padre paused. It had grown dark in the Church. On each side of the pulpit a wrought-iron bracket, raised like a skeletal arm, held a thick white candle. The two small flames from these candles suddenly furnished him with inspiration and he began to explain their significance...As the world grows darker, so the flame of truth grows brighter...just as these candles were slowly growing brighter as darkness fell outside. He was talking in a different tone, hurriedly, even incoherently. In spite of the wafting punkahs which made the candles flicker, it was stifling in the Church. He left the candles and returned to the subject of Sin. He felt there was something he had left unsaid, something that it was vital to explain to his congregation. No doubt they were suffering from weariness after the anxious night they had passed. But if they were tired, so was he. He had never felt more tired in his life, nor more suffocated by omnipresent Sin. The heat was appalling...but Sin dazed him even more.

As he continued to talk, somewhat at random, the conviction slowly gained on him that he was delivering his sermon not to the half dozen ladies in front of him but to the ranks of great earthenware jars at the back of the Church. They crouched there in their shadowy pews, perfectly motionless. He pleaded with them to listen to the Word of God, but they made no answer. Ignoring the ladies, who were becoming uneasy, he tried again and again to formulate the one elusive argument that would win over those dim, sinful ranks of jars. But they remained deaf to the exhortations which echoed round their stony ears.

Although Miss Hughes had not yet killed herself (she was reluctantly reserving this measure until Harry was satisfied that he had done justice to the cause of life) she had steadfastly maintained her refusal to move from the *dak* bungalow. Neither of the two young men had expected her to survive that first night. They were even more surprised when she continued to survive.

Fleury secretly believed that it was Harry's lack of eloquence which had caused Miss Hughes to stay where she was.

Unfortunately, when Fleury rather condescendingly agreed to accompany Harry on another mission to convince Miss Hughes, he found that he was quite unable to get into his stride. Miss Hughes appeared quite insensible to the wonders of the natural world, on which he had been counting. Worse, he soon discovered

that the wonders of man's own creation (Shakespeare, and so on) meant no more to her than had "the golden glories of the morning", about which she had peremptorily cut him short, to ask him to kill a mosquito that had somehow become obsessed with her lovely naked arms. Harry and Fleury exchanged uneasy glances.

"Oh, do look! I feel sure it's bitten me." Miss Hughes sulkily rubbed her arm, blinking like a child. The two young men peered dutifully at her smooth skin, which was of a delicate, transparent whiteness, showing here and there the faintest of duck egg blue veins. Fleury, forgetting for the moment that he was supposed to be looking for the place where the mosquito had had the good fortune to penetrate this lovely skin, gazed with frank admiration at Miss Hughes, thinking what a fair substance her sex was made of. What large, sad eyes she had! What glistening dark hair! Her features, though small, were perfectly sculpted: how delightful that tiny nose and delicate mouth! And he immediately began to consider a poem to celebrate her alabaster confection.

On account of the heat, and perhaps also on account of her despair as a "fallen woman", Miss Hughes had received the two young men in her chemise, reclining on her bed in a way so forlorn that no normally good-hearted gentleman, unless a man of granite principles, could have resisted an impulse to comfort her; beside her chemise she wore only her drawers and two or three cotton petticoats. The criteria of female beauty, as Fleury knew very well, tend to change from place to place and from generation to generation: now it is eyes that are important, now it is the slenderness of your hands; perhaps for your grandmother her bosom was crucial, for your daughter it may be her ankles or even (who can tell?) her absence of bosom. Fleury and Harry were particularly sensitive to necks. Louise Dunstaple, Fleury had already noticed, had a lovely neck, and so did Miss Hughes. There was something so defenceless about Miss Hughes's neck, it was so different from their own muscular, masculine necks that the two young men could hardly keep their eyes off it. Her dark hair was piled up into an untidy chignon beneath which a number of dark wisps had escaped; above the collar of her chemise, as she moved her head, delicate tendons played like the filaments of a spider's web. What a beautiful neck it was! And the fact that it could plainly have done with a good scrubbing somehow made it all the more attractive, all the more sensual, all the more *real*. That is what Fleury was thinking as he gazed at Miss Hughes.

Miss Hughes, who sensed that she was being found attractive, permitted herself to cheer up a little and asked the young men to call her Lucy. They needn't think though, that she was going to the Residency with them. She could not bear the shame of everyone knowing she had been ruined. The frankness with which she spoke of her "ruin" rather took one's breath away at first, but one soon got used to it. It was evident that she was still resolved to kill herself, if the sepoys did not do so first. And no matter how hard they tried to persuade her they were quite unable to make her yield on this point. The most that she was prepared to concede was that she might notify them once she had decided not to delay the fatal act any longer, to allow them "a last chance" (provided she did not get drunk again and kill herself spontaneously the way she almost had the other day)...it was purely out of friendship towards them that she agreed to this, and on condition that they did not bring the Padre.

"Oh, it's trying to bite me again!" she exclaimed. "You said you wouldn't let it!" And the rest of the visit passed pleasantly enough with Harry sitting on one side of her bed and Fleury on the other, each keeping a watch on one of her arms to prevent the mosquito from again ravishing the unfortunate girl.

Talking it over later, Fleury said: "Look here, we should be asking ourselves *why* Lucy won't come into the Residency...Instead of which we waste our time thinking of plans to kidnap her or reasons why life is worth living."

"She won't come because she's ashamed of what that cad did to her. I should like to give him a deuced good thrashing." Harry, lying on his mattress in the banqueting hall looked as if he would have given a great deal to have a horsewhip and the offending officer placed within reach.

"Precisely. She's ashamed. But above all it's the ladies who make her feel ashamed. I mean she doesn't seem to mind *us*. Now if we could get one of the ladies to go and visit her and act as if being seduced wasn't the end of the world...D'you see what I'm getting at?"

"That sounds a good idea...but who would go?"

"I'm sure Miriam would go willingly but she's got her migraine at the moment. You don't think we could ask Louise?"

"Oh, I say, she's my sister! And she doesn't know anything about...you know, being seduced and all that rot. She wouldn't be any good at all at that sort of thing."

"But she doesn't have to know anything about it. She would just have to go along with us and ask her to come to the Residency."

"Oh no, George, steady on. You probably don't know how *gup* spreads in India. One has to think of her reputation, after all. She *is* my sister, you know."

And that seemed to be the end of the matter. But they both wondered whether one morning they would wake up to hear that Lucy had been found lifeless.

Fleury had been so busy with one thing and another that he had not had the chance of seeing very much of Louise. This was a pity because he still had not settled the question of the spaniel, Chloë. It was not a very suitable time to start giving people dogs. A dog must eat and perhaps food would soon be in short supply. On the other hand, although he did not care for dogs he had grown sentimental about the idea of Chloë as a gift for Louise: he wanted to see the golden ringlets of Chloë's ears beside Louise's golden tresses (afterwards, Chloë could be got rid of in some way or another).

At last, on the eighth day after the mutiny at Captainganj, Fleury found an opportunity for a private word with Louise. Harry, who was still busy reinforcing the banqueting hall, had sent Fleury to invite his sister to visit his battery, of which he was very proud. He found her attending the Sunday school which the Padre was holding in the vestry: it was her custom to bring little Fanny and then stay to soothe the smaller children if they became distressed by the Padre's explications. But hardly had Fleury delivered his message when Louise was obliged to hand him the baby she was holding in order to comfort another member of the Padre's audience. Fleury, who was unused to babies, was thus obliged to sit with the infant squirming on his lap and to listen to what was being said.

The Padre, who had decided, perhaps rashly, to address the children on the subject of the Great Exhibition, was telling them about the wonders to be found in the Palace of Glass: the machines, the jewels and the statues.

"And yet, children, all these wonderful things were only the natural products of the earth put into more useful and beautiful forms: trees into furniture, wool into garments and so on. Man is able to make these things but he isn't clever enough to make trees, flowers and animals. They must have been made by someone with far greater knowledge than us, in other words..."

"By God," piped up a little boy with a shining halo of curls.

"Precisely. Only God could produce something so complicated in its structure and workings. Everywhere in the world we see *design* and that, of course, plainly shows that there must have been a *designer*..."

"Oh Padre!" cried Fleury who had unfortunately heard these words and was unable to let them pass, "should we not rather speak to these little ones of the love of God we find in our hearts than about design, production and calculation? Only too soon the materialism of the adult world will smother these innocent little lambs!" And as he uttered the word "lambs" he picked up the baby from his lap and brandished it in his excitement. For a moment it looked as if the unfortunate infant he was wielding might slip from his grasp and dash out its little brains on the floor...but Louise swiftly darted forward and took it from him before the disaster could occur. Discountenanced by this removal of his evidence Fleury watched the Padre turn pale.

"Mr Fleury," he muttered. "I must ask you not to interrupt. I was merely proving the existence of God *by logical means* to these little ones, so that they might know that they are completely in His power...so that they might know that of themselves they are nothing but sinners who can only be washed clean by the Blood of our Lord." The Padre paused. Fleury had dropped his eyes and was shaking his head sadly, whether in penitence or disagreement it was impossible to say. The Padre was silent for a little while longer wondering what heretical assumption could have just shaken Fleury's head for him. Could it be that he did not believe in the Atonement?

But the children were waiting so he began cautiously to talk about the lighthouse he had seen at the Exhibition, a splendid lighthouse with a fixed light and moving prisms. What did it remind him of?

"Of God," piped up the little boy with glittering curls.

"Well, not exactly. It reminded me of the Bible. Why? Because I thought of the many lives it had saved the way a lighthouse saves men from shipwreck. The Bible is the lighthouse of the world. Those nations which are not governed by it are heathenish and idolatrous. Men without the Bible worship stars and stones. For example, ancient history gives an account of two hundred children being burned to death as a sacrifice to Saturn...which is, of course, the Moloch of the Scriptures." The Padre surveyed the class. "You wouldn't like that, children, would you?" The children agreed that they would not care for it in the least.

Presently it was time for the Sunday school to disband. The Padre went to a cupboard and took out a large, flat wooden box. This box he brought over to the children and when he had opened it they uttered a gasp, for inside there nestled rows of crystallized fruit glowing amber, ruby and emerald. Some of the smaller children could not resist reaching out their tiny fingers to this box. But the Padre said: "I'm going to give you each a piece of sugar fruit, children, but you must not eat it yourselves, for we have been taught that it is better to give than to receive. Outside the gate you will see some poor Christian natives sitting on the ground...I shall now go to the gate with you and there you must each give your piece of sugar fruit to one of these unfortunate men."

By this time there was only a handful of native Christians left. They sat in the dust with their backs to one or other of the tamarind trees which made an imposing crescent of shade around the gates. They were silent, too, for one cannot keep on wailing or humming indefinitely, and they looked as if they had given up hope of being offered protection. There were also one or two money-lenders, known as *bunniahs*, who had come along to buy up the "certificates of loyalty" as a speculative investment, at a price which varied between four and eight annas at first, but which soon dropped to nothing for a rumour was going about that now, at last, the sepoys were making a definite move to crush the *feringhees* in the Residency; that very evening they would advance from Captainganj and take up positions to attack at dawn. Apart from the *bunniahs* there were, of

course, the inevitable bystanders one finds everywhere in India, idly looking on, wherever there is anything of interest happening (and even where there is nothing) because they are too poor to have anything better to do, and the least sign of activity or purpose, even symbolic (a railway station without trains, for example), exerts a magnetic influence over them which nothing in their own devastated lives can counter.

The ragged group of native Christians received the sugar fruit from their little benefactors expressionlessly and in silence. But when the children had gone back into the enclave they wasted no time in throwing it into the ditch for, although Christians, many of them considered themselves to be Hindus as well, indeed primarily, and had no intention of being defiled like the sepoys with their greased cartridges.

Fleury had contrived to walk back with Louise and Fanny to the Dunstaples' house. Because he was nervous of Louise he playfully tried to tease Fanny about what pretty dimples she had; but Fanny failed to respond and the teasing fell rather flat. To tell the truth, this was by no means the first time that Fanny had been used as a conversation piece by some lovesick suitor trying to get on a more relaxed footing with Louise, and she resented it. Presently she ran off, leaving Fleury feeling more awkward in Louise's company than ever.

Disconcerted, Fleury said humbly: "I'm afraid I must apologize, Miss Dunstaple, for that disturbance during Sunday school...and as for the baby which you so wisely took from me, to be honest I'd quite forgotten I had it in my hands."

"Really, Mr Fleury, there's no need to apologize because there was no harm done, after all, though I must say that I do wonder if there is anything achieved by sending such young children to Sunday school."

"I fear the Padre was angry with me for speaking out like that," Fleury said. The rolls of fair curls which escaped from beneath Louise's bonnet seemed to him so like a spaniel's ear that, for a moment, he was able to imagine that it was not Louise but Chloë who was walking along beside him. Something told him, however, that it would not be a good idea to give Chloë to Louise, at least for the immediate future.

Louise was surveying him with a gentle frown. "I'm sure you're right, Mr Fleury, to plead for love rather than calculation to order our lives but...forgive me if I speak frankly...should you not also give a thought to the distress you are causing the poor Padre Sahib with your views?"

"My dear Miss Louise! I should never for a moment wish to cause distress to the Padre Sahib. But think how important it is that we should find *the right way to lead our lives!* And it is only by argument that we *can* find the right way...There is no other way to find the truth."

"Alas," said Louise, looking sad, "I sometimes wonder whether we shall ever find the right way. I wonder whether we shall ever live together in harmony, one class with another, one race with another...Will not the labouring classes always be resentful of our privileges? Will not the natives always be ready to rise up against the 'pale-faced Christian knight with the Excalibur of Truth in his hand' as the Padre so picturesquely referred to him last week?"

Fleury was having trouble smothering his excitement; when he became excited he invariably began to sweat copiously and he did not want Louise to see him in such a disgusting state; it seemed unfair, the higher his spirit soared, the more his face, neck and armpits seeped...but such is man's estate.

"Oh Louise," he exclaimed, "that is why it's so important that we bring to India a civilization of the heart, and not only to India but to the whole world...rather than this sordid materialism. Only then will we have a chance of living together in harmony. Will there even be classes and races on that golden day in the future? No! For we shall all be brothers working not to take advantage of each other but for each other's good!"

Louise was perhaps looking a little taken aback by the excitement she had suddenly aroused in Fleury. She was certainly looking with curiosity at his vehement, perspiring features. But Fleury with an involuntary groan of ecstasy had whipped a folded paper from the pocket of his Tweedside lounging jacket.

"These are the words of a very dear friend of mine from Oxford, a poet (like myself), who is now working as an inspector of schools..." And Fleury began to declaim in such ringing tones that a couple of native pensioners slumbering in the shade of one of the cannons started up, under the impression that they were being ordered to stand to arms.

"Children of the future, whose day has not yet dawned, you, when that day arrives, will hardly believe what obstructions were long suffered to prevent it coming! You who, with all your faults, have neither the avidity of aristocracies, nor the narrowness of middle classes, you, whose power of simple enthusiasm is your great gift, will not comprehend how progress towards man's best perfection...the adorning and ennobling of his spirit...should have been reluctantly undertaken; how it should have been for years and years retarded by barren commonplaces, by worn out claptraps. You will know nothing of the doubts, fears, prejudices they had to dispel. But you, in your turn, with difficulties of your own, will then be mounting some new step in the arduous ladder whereby man climbs towards his perfection: towards that unattainable but irresistible lodestar, gazed after with earnest longing, and invoked with bitter tears; the longing of thousands of hearts, the tears of many generations."

Louise did not speak. Her eyes shone, as if with tears. She looked distressed, but perhaps it was simply the strain of listening to Fleury in such a heat. A pariah dog, half bald with manage, as thin as a greyhound, and with a lame back leg, which had been sniffing Fleury's shoes and had slunk away whining as he began to declaim, now cautiously came hopping back again to investigate. He aimed a kick at it.

“My brother has spoken to me of this poor girl in the *dak* bungalow,” said Louise hurriedly after a silence. “I’m afraid Father is rather angry with you for suggesting that I should go to the *dak* to persuade her to come here. But please don’t think that I’m angry too. I think it right that a woman should go to bring the poor sinful creature back into the Residency...Isn’t it punishment enough that she has been dishonoured? And no doubt it was more the man’s fault than her own. And could it not be that she was more foolish than sinful? But, of course I know nothing of these matters as my dear brother is forever telling me.”

Fleury was deeply touched by these sympathetic words; at the same time he was too overwhelmed by Louise’s loveliness to be able to gaze directly at her face. Meanwhile, the pariah dog, which for some reason found him strangely exciting, had again come stealthily hopping back and was attempting to lean lovingly against his ankles.

Word of mutiny at the prison and Treasury reached the Residency an hour before dusk. Not long after five o’clock, when the streets of Krishnapur were most crowded, a strange clinking sound was heard. People wondered at first where it was coming from; it seemed to be all around them. As it grew louder they realized that among the familiar inhabitants of the town a number of strangers had appeared: they moved in long lines through the evening crowds, looking neither to right nor left, moving with a curious, rapid shuffle away from the middle of the town; presently, it became clear that the sound came from the ankle chains with which they were shackled. The prison guards had mutinied on a signal given by the sepoys at Captainganj and had freed their prisoners.

Soon afterwards came the news that the Treasury sepoys had also mutinied: a number of them had been seen hurrying through the now empty streets of Krishnapur from the direction of the Treasury. They wore *dhotis* instead of uniforms and carried heavy, oddly-shaped burdens on their shoulders and around their necks; they had broached a cart-load of silver rupees and filled the legs of their breeches with them. Now it seemed that they were staggering away with heavy, trunkless men on their shoulders.

As it was growing dark Lucy appeared at the Residency gates, accompanied by the Dunstaples’ *khansamah* and a large amount of baggage. Harry and Fleury were beside themselves with astonishment and relief. What had caused Lucy to relent? Presently they learned that Louise had sent the *khansamah* with a letter, begging Lucy to accept her friendship and pleading with her to come into the Residency. Surprisingly enough, Lucy had agreed and now here she was. And not a moment too soon either. Behind her, just visible against the darkening sky, a pillar of smoke climbed from the *dak* bungalow. Then, as the thatched roof caught, the native town was brightly illuminated for a few moments before fading back into the darkness once again.

That night the entire cantonment burned. The Collector had expected that it would and consequently he at first showed no particular sign of alarm as people came to report, while he was at supper, that new fires had been sighted from the Residency roof. He continued eating placidly at the head of the table which had been set up in his bedroom and to which he had invited a number of guests, just as he might have done in normal times downstairs.

The table, although smaller than that of the dining-room, was set no less elegantly with glistening silver and glass. It also held one of the Collector’s favourite possessions, a centrepiece by Elkington and Mason of Birmingham in electro-silver and on which candle-holders in the shape of swans’ necks alternated with winged cherubim holding dishes. It was not simply that this centrepiece was an object of remarkable beauty in itself, it was also a representative of a new and wonderful method of multiplying works of art.

This was yet another startling advance which had occurred in the Collector’s lifetime. Indeed, not much more than a decade had passed since the first small medals, coated by the aid of electricity, had been shown as curiosities. Now articles of far greater complexity even than this elaborate centre-piece were being produced, not singly, but by the thousand. Perfect copies had been made by electric agency of the celebrated cup by Benvenuto Cellini in the British Museum. Who could doubt the benefits which would result from placing such articles within the means of all classes of society...articles which could not fail to produce a love of the fine arts?

The Collector had several examples of electro-plating scattered about the Residency...in particular a heavy-thighed “Eve” in electro-bronze leaning against a tree-trunk around which a snake had wound itself (“How popular snakes were with sculptors these days!” he mused parenthetically): this piece stood on the landing at the top of the stairs. He also had a smaller piece in his drawing-room made of an alloy of nickel, copper and zinc which very nearly approached the colour of silver...this represented “ *Fame Scattering Rose Petals on Shakespeare’s Grave*”. His wife, too, on her own account, possessed a number of electro-metallic dogs. Could anyone doubt, the Collector wondered, sitting slumped in his chair for he was very tired and watching absently the winking highlights of the electro-silver before his eyes, that this was another invention which would rapidly make mankind sensitive to Beauty? Yes, he remembered sadly, the Magistrate had doubted it, and had scoffed when he had suggested that one day electro-metallurgy would permit every working man to drink from a Cellini cup.

The other people at the table included the Magistrate, Miriam, Major Hogan, Dr McNab, Mr and Mrs Rayne, the pretty Misses O’Hanlon, and, at the far end of the table in the most inconspicuous places they could find,

his two eldest daughters, for whom a meal in the presence of their authoritarian father was an ordeal almost as alarming as the prospect of the siege itself. They had all seen a shadow of despondency pass over the Collector's face and naturally assumed, as anyone would, that it had been caused by the news that several bungalows were in flames. Only Miriam guessed otherwise, for he would surely never allow himself to appear despondent in the face of their common danger...moreover, in the past few days she had come to know him a little better and had noticed more than once that when he was tired his mind had a habit of slipping away from the urgent business it should have been attending to, and browsing on quite other matters. And she wondered what he might be thinking about now.

The atmosphere around the table was very strained. Since the Collector himself was saying nothing about their predicament none of his guests felt that it would be proper to introduce the subject, yet how could they possibly talk of anything else? The truth was that every single topic of conversation they attempted promptly fled back like a bolt of lightning to this predicament. Only the Magistrate seemed to be deriving any pleasure from the atmosphere of constraint which hung over the table, and he presently observed: "I wonder what the Apostles found to talk about during the Last Supper." But this remark, to put it mildly, was not found to be amusing, and was coldly received...not that the Magistrate would mind about that.

What made things worse was that messages did not cease to arrive for the Collector. Whichever of the young officers it was who was in command of the sentinels posted around the enclave and on the Residency roof had no doubt been ordered to report the least new development, and he was performing his duties with punctiliousness. Every fresh beacon that sprang out of the darkness of the cantonment, in the view of this officer, constituted a new development. A verbal message was sent to the Collector and intercepted at the door of his bedroom by his English manservant, Vokins. Vokins then advanced, portentously discreet, to whisper it into the Collector's ear. The Collector's eyebrows would rise sadly, but he would listen without looking up, slumped in his chair and twirling the stem of his claret glass. Perhaps he would nod slowly, puffing out his cheeks in an odd and gloomy sort of way as he did so. The Collector's guests could not hear what was whispered in his ear, of course; the only person who knew the content of these messages was Vokins. Vokins, however, did not inspire confidence by his demeanour. He was a pale and haggard sort of individual at the best of times; now his pallor increased and the bones of his skull seemed to stand out more sharply, in a way which the Magistrate found interesting but which everyone else found sepulchral.

The trouble was that Vokins, as he made his solemn journeys from the door to the Collector's ear, did not understand that many of these messages were redundant (for, after all, once a cantonment has been set alight the number of bungalows blazing, more or less, is a matter of relative indifference). Vokins thought they were cumulative and progressive; Vokins lacked the broader view. He tended only to see the prospect of the Death of Vokins. Although some of the Collector's guests might have been hard put to it to think of what a man of Vokins's class had to lose, to Vokins it was very clear what he had to lose: namely his life. He was not at all anxious to leave his skin on the Indian plains; he wanted to take it back to the slums of Soho or wherever it came from.

By the time pudding was being served his expression had become tragic and he was uttering his messages in a muted gasp of terror...so that in the end even the Collector noticed and looked up enquiringly, as if to say: "Whatever is the matter with the fellow?" but then, evidently concluding that it was the heat, sank back into his own thoughts which were still following, in a meandering fashion, the theme of progress.

When the last of these messages was whispered funereally into his ear (five more bungalows adding warmth to the already stifling night) such a look of dismay came over the Collector's face that the two pretty Misses O'Hanlon could not resist a rapid intake of breath at the sight of it. But the Collector had merely been thinking of Prince Albert's Model Houses for the Labouring Classes and of another argument he had had with the Magistrate about them...how shocked he had been at the Magistrate's attitude to these model houses!

On his way to the Crystal Palace a small block of houses had caught his eye not far from the south entrance to the Exhibition and a little to the west of the Barracks. He had paused, thinking how cheerful they were in their modest way. They had stood there, respectful but unabashed, without giving themselves airs amid the grander edifices round about. They were square and simple (like the British working man himself, as one of his colleagues of the Sculpture Jury had lyrically expressed it) with a large window upstairs and downstairs, and they were built in pairs with a modestly silhouetted coping stone above the entrance but no flamboyant decoration. They were not dour and sullen like so many of the houses in the populous districts; they were proud, but yet knew their places. In short, they were so delightful that for a moment one even had to envy the working man his luck to be able to live in them as one passed on one's way towards the Exhibition.

But when the Collector had grown eloquent about these charming little dwellings, for this was in the early days before he had realized that the Magistrate was impermeable to optimism where social improvements were concerned, the Magistrate had spoken with equal vehemence about the exploitation of the poorer classes, the appalling conditions in which they were expected to live and so on, dismissing Prince Albert's model houses as a sop to the royal conscience. The Collector had protested that he was certain that the Prince's houses had been prompted, in a genuine spirit of sympathy, by the reports published by the Board of Health's inspectors about the wretched home accommodation of the poorer classes, the utter lack of drainage, of water supply and ventilation.

"What prompted these trivial improvements, on the contrary," the Magistrate had replied, "was a fear of a

cholera epidemic among the wealthier classes!"

Well, the Collector mused, it is impossible to argue with someone who ascribes generous motives to self-interest, and he looked up mournfully past the optimistic glints scattered by the electro-silver branches of the centre-piece to the fox-red growth that sprouted from the Magistrate's permanently contemptuous features. "What on earth is that?" he wondered aloud, having noticed, beyond the Magistrate, through the open window a tinge of buttercup in the night sky. Then, he added: "Oh yes, I see," and got to his feet.

Downstairs in his study he lit a cheroot and shortly afterwards put it out again; instead he plucked his watch from its nest below his ribs. Once more he had to go upstairs; it was time for the last and most unpleasant task of the day. As he opened the door of his study he was confronted by a stuffed owl in a glass bell; one of its shoulders had long ago been eaten away by insects and it glared accusingly at the Collector with its glittering yellow eyes. But if the owl did not like the Collector, the Collector did not like the owl...for this owl was one of a vast population of owls, and of other stuffed birds which had come to roost in the Residency, together with a million other useless possessions. The Collector had long ago realized that he should have ordered them to be left to their fate. Instead, these possessions were stacked all over the Residency, all over Dunstaple's house, and even in the banqueting hall. Only the Magistrate had refused to allow this useless but prized rubbish into the Cutcherry, which, of course, had meant more for everyone else. Now every room, every corridor, every staircase was occluded with the garrison's acquisitions. "But still, are not possessions important? Do they not show how far a man has progressed in society from abject and anti-social poverty towards respectability? Possessions are surely a *physical* high-water mark of the *moral* tide which has been flooding steadily for the past twenty years or more."

Amid the lumber of furniture, vases, crockery, musical instruments, and countless other objects, several more birds, motionless within their bubbles of glass, watched him wearily climb the stairs. He paused at the top, frowning. A ghostly voice had whispered in his ear: "The world is a bridge. Pass over it but do not build a house on it." Was that a Christian or a Hindu proverb? He could not remember.

To accommodate the new arrival the Collector had had to turn out an indigo planter and his wife who had lodged themselves, uninvited, in the only remaining room. They had made a disagreeable fuss and had left, still grumbling, to seek shelter from Dr Dunstaple. Now, in their place, Hari was sitting cross-legged on the floor with his elbows propped on his knees and a sullen expression on his face. The Collector was annoyed to see that the room was lit only by a single candle; he spoke sharply to the bearer waiting at the door and he hurried away to find an oil-lamp.

"My dear Hari, why ever did you not call for more light? How long have you been sitting in the dark like this?"

Hari shrugged his shoulders crossly, as if to indicate that lights were of no importance to him. In the shadows the Collector could make out the form of another seated figure, but the light of the solitary candle was too dim for him to see who it was.

"I left instructions that everything for your comfort..."

"Oh, comfort...You think that I worry anxiously about such a thing as comfort!"

"I should have come before this but you must understand, I've had so many things to see to." But not meaning to sound plaintive, he added firmly: "One's duty has to come first, of course." Hari shrugged again, but made no other reply.

The Collector was fond of Hari; it distressed him deeply that he should have to take advantage of him but he could see no alternative. He sighed and waited with impatience for the bearer to bring the lamp. To conduct this interview in semidarkness seemed furtive and unmanly to him.

When the lamp came at last it illuminated not only Hari but also the other figure seated on the carpet, who turned out to be the Prime Minister. Of course, he had come too! And he could not help thinking ungratefully: "Another mouth to feed!" Not that the Prime Minister looked as if he ate very much, however, he was only a bundle of skin and bones. The Prime Minister, in any case, seemed indifferent to his fate; he was gazing incuriously at the carpet a few inches in front of the Collector's feet.

"I know that it must seem ungrateful of me to detain you here in the circumstances. I should like you to know that, personally speaking, it is the very last thing I should want to do. But I have to think of the safety of those under my protection...hm...a great number of women and children..."

"I show loyalty...You take advantage of loyalty. You give certificate to sweepers and send him away. Me you keep!" Hari's voice rose in shrill indignation. "Me you keep prisoner and Prime Minister also! Very frankly, Mr Hopkin (although Hari correctly referred to 'Mr and Mrs Hopkins' he had a habit, distressing to the Collector, of reducing each separately to the singular), very frankly, it is all 'as clear as mud' to me. Please to explain these questions."

Humiliated, the Collector could only repeat what he had said before about the safety of women and children.

Hari and the Prime Minister had presented themselves at the gates towards the end of the afternoon; evidently Hari and his father, the Maharajah, had had a disagreement over the question of loyalty to the British. Hari, firmly on the side of Progress, had insisted on leading the Palace army to their defence. But the

Maharajah had declined to let him do any such thing. The whole country was rising to put the *feringhees* and their vassals to the sword; his own power was certain to increase once the Company was destroyed. He did not want Progress...he wanted money, jewels and naked girls, or rather, since he already had all of these things, he wanted more of them. Hari, like any reasonable person, found these desires (money, jewels, naked girls) incomprehensible. His father was prepared to connive at the destruction of the fount of knowledge...the knowledge that had produced Shakespeare and would soon have railway trains galloping across the Indian continent! He had made a short speech on this topic, summoning the army and the Prime Minister to follow him to the side of the British to defend Progress. But in the end only the Prime Minister had followed him. The army, even if the circumstances had been more enticing, had long since lost its appetite for fighting. There was nothing left for Hari to do but to pledge his loyalty, obtain a certificate, and return to the Palace. The Collector, busy with other matters, had sent a message to ask him to stay. Hari had not wanted to. It is one thing to bring an army to defend one's friends, another thing to join them simply to be attacked and probably killed. But in the meantime the advantages of having Hari in the Residency had become only too clear to the Collector. Hari's presence might give the impression that the Maharajah supported the British. At the very least it would guarantee the neutrality of his army. Soon it became obvious to him that he could not let Hari go. Now, thinking about it again he became irritated. "It's not my fault. How could I have acted differently? It's unjust of Hari to treat me as if I'm personally responsible!"

"Come, Hari," he said after a long silence. "You must forgive me for treating you so badly. Let's go up on the roof and watch the cantonment burning. That's not a sight we see every day of the week."

From the roof it seemed as if a perfect semi-circle of fire stretched around the Residency enclave like some mysterious sign isolating a contagion from the dark countryside.

10

The Collector had intended to make a round of the defences in the hour before dawn in order to give encouragement to his men. But he was desperately tired and Vokins failed to wake him at the time he had requested. The result was that he overslept by a good forty-five minutes and he was still pulling on his clothes as the first shots were fired.

The Padre, however, was making a round of the defences on his own account and, in the circumstances, this was probably encouragement enough...for the Padre had become extremely worried by the dangerous situation that his Krishnapur flock now found itself in. It was not the dangerous situation itself, however, but rather its implications that were at the source of his anxiety. If they now found themselves in mortal danger it could only be that God was displeased with them and was preparing to punish them as he had punished the Cities of the Plain! And yet the Padre, in his blindness, had believed that he was having some success in ferreting out sin among his flock.

In the few days since they had all been gathered together into the enclave the Padre, becoming increasingly frantic, had not ceased hurrying from one group to another. Even the steady, hot wind which blew relentlessly all day had not deterred him...indeed, it drove him on, for it seemed like a foretaste of the breath of Hell. His feet continued to patter over the searing earth while his black habit drank up the heat of the sun. Sometimes he wondered whether he might not already be in Hell. One thing above all kept him going. This was the possibility that God, in the last resort, might stay His hand from the total destruction of the Krishnapur sinners...if they showed signs of penitence.

But Sin is hydra-headed; chop a sin off here and a dozen more are bristling in its place. Sometimes as he toiled about the glaring compound the Padre was obliged to stop for a cool drink of water in a shady place; he would have dropped from exhaustion, otherwise. And in these brief interludes of peace he found himself having to admire, in a perfectly objective way, the incredible ingenuity of the Lord's ways. He did not move in mysterious ways so much as in beatifically cunning ones. For at the same time as He had shown the Padre the path he must follow, the path had instantly sprouted new obstacles. Perhaps it would not have been such a difficult matter to isolate sin in the normal life of the cantonment and stamp it out, but now, with his flock herded together in extreme contiguity, many of them at the young age when temptation of the flesh and of the mind is most acute, his task together with occasions for sinful behaviour seemed to increase daily as by a system of compound interest. The closer together that people live the more they sin...in the Padre's experience such a proposition was axiomatic.

So the Padre had toiled on, trying to stem the tide. Sometimes he became dizzy with fatigue and suffered strange imaginings; the sinful jars in the Church, for example. But in a sense the Padre was not wrong about these jars for they were a concrete symbol of the material world that was constantly encroaching on the shrinking spiritual sandbank where the Christians of Krishnapur were standing. *Krishnapur!* Even the name of their community was that of a heathen deity.

Now, in the hour of darkness before dawn, the Padre stumbled on around the defences where men waited in silent huddled groups for the order to stand to arms. The darkness at this hour was at its most intense; frequently he tripped over unseen objects in his path, and more than once he fell, hurting himself badly. At each post he exhorted the huddled figures to penitence. He knew they were sinners, he told them; they must repent now before it was too late.

"Look down, we beseech thee," he pleaded, his voice echoing weirdly in the darkness, "and hear us calling out of the depth of misery, and out of the jaws of this death which is ready now to swallow us up: Save, Lord, or else we perish. The living, the living, shall praise thee..."

Did his exhortations move the hearts of those shadowy, motionless figures whom he could feel standing there in the darkness but whom he could not see? They remained as silent as the stone jars. He hurried on with the fear in his heart that he was failing.

"Stir up thy strength, O Lord, and come out and help us; for thou givest not alway the battle to the strong, but canst save by many or by few. O let not our sins now cry against us for vengeance..."

At each post he handed out a bundle of devotional tracts for the men to read as soon as it became light. Hands took them from him in silence; no word was spoken. He was afraid now that he would not be able to complete the circuit of the defences before dawn. It seemed to him that the darkness was becoming less opaque...and soon he realized why he was no longer stumbling: it was because he was becoming aware of objects in the darkness.

"O Almighty Lord," he intoned in such a high, weird voice that all the pariah dogs in the compound set up a howl and the Collector, at last awake and cursing himself as he fumbled for his clothes, said to himself: "The poor fellow has gone off his head with the strain."

"...who art a most strong tower to all them that put their trust in thee..."

"Dammit, bring a light," shouted the Collector to the trembling, haggard Vokins, afraid that he might have

to do battle with the sepoys in his nightshirt.

"Be now and evermore our defence; grant us victory if it be thy will; look in pity upon the wounded and the prisoners; cheer the anxious; comfort the bereaved; succour the dying..."

That high voice continued to echo eerily over the slowly brightening ramparts and batteries, over the still smouldering cantonment, to float over the sleeping town and lose itself in the vast silence of the Indian plain.

"For God's sake will someone tell the Padre to stop that noise," raged the Collector, his normal piety shattered by nerves.

"...have mercy on the fallen; and hasten the time when war shall cease...in...all...the...world."

Hardly had the Padre's chanting died away when the first shots sounded from the outer darkness, gusts preceding the storm of fire and brimstone that was to fall on the enclave.

The Padre had not had time to visit the banqueting hall before the first fiery squalls dashed themselves against the Residency defences. Fleury and Harry would not have welcomed him anyway; they were beside themselves with excitement as the sky began to brighten and were finding it a torment to remain silent beside their six-pounder. Every time one caught the other's eye they would both almost swoon with repressed glee. They had spent the hours of darkness in whispered conversation over the silken brass skin of their cannon; so much was happening, never had they felt more wide awake! Thank heaven that Lucy was safe! This was, they agreed, a great load off their minds, though there were, of course, still problems which had to be sorted out with respect to Lucy. In spite of the harrowing circumstances the ladies were still refusing to have anything to do with her...they had hissed with indignation at the suggestion that she should sleep in the billiard room where ladies of the better class had been installed. But where else could she sleep? The Collector's authority had been invoked in the end and she had duly been established there, but nobody was happy about the arrangement.

Now, in their excitement the young men had temporarily forgotten about Lucy. What was concerning them at the moment was the thought that, since the sepoys could not be expected to attack from their direction, they might have no chance to fire their cannon. There was an important question they had to resolve: would it be considered permissible, in the circumstances, to fire at *any* native who presented himself within range, as they might well not see any actual sepoys? Would it be sporting? What they concluded in the end was this: it all depended on the direction of the native's progress...if the native was coming either directly towards them, or at an angle of anything up to forty-five degrees, it was fair to assume that his intentions were mischievous and they could blow him to smithereens (at any angle greater than forty-five degrees they would quickly review his case and then blow him to smithereens or not, as the case might be).

While they were settling this the darkness was slowly fading on the verandah where they waited; the forms of the old native pensioners began to appear out of the gloom, sitting there white-mustached and medalled with their knees to their ears. Barlow, the taciturn man from the Salt Agency, who had spent the early hours eating Kabul grapes and dismally spitting the pips into a handkerchief which he afterwards replaced in his pocket, sat in a chair with his hands in his pockets breathing asthmatically. He had been allotted no specific job and his manner was disaffected. The two fat Sikhs chewed *pan*, aside, and spat at intervals. Faintly from within the banqueting hall came the sound of snores; Major Hogan had taken a quantity of brandy after dining with the Collector and had then made a corner for himself amid the lumber of "possessions"; there he had stretched out his bedding. He had left instructions that he was not to be disturbed unless the situation became critical.

It was Harry who had established the emplacement for the six-pounder on the verandah; he had had a couple of yards of the balustrade knocked away to increase the field of fire; at the same time he had had an excellent notion for protecting the gunners, which was to prise off two of the giant marble busts that crowned the roof and have them dragged into position on each side of the cannon. What a labour that had been! So heavy were these great lumps of marble that when they had fallen from the roof they had half buried themselves in the earthen surround. Harry and Fleury had become quite hoarse shouting at the doddering pensioners; in the end they had had to commandeer a pair of bullocks to aid the ropes and levers the pensioners were wielding so feebly. But now the giant heads of Plato and Socrates, each with an expression of penetrating wisdom carved on his white features surveyed the river and the melon beds beyond.

Sometimes, when you try to peer too intensely into the gloom, your eyes make you see things which do not exist; Harry and Fleury presently began to have just this experience. If they had not known that it was impossible they could have sworn that the distant melon beds were seething with moving shadows. Yet there was no question of an attack from that quarter across so much open ground. Their heads turned to each other uneasily, nevertheless; then they looked at the pensioners to see if they were noticing anything; they did not want to make fools of themselves in front of these veterans by ordering them to fire at shadows. But the pensioners sat there impassively; their eyes were too weak, in any case, to be much help in this situation. After some hesitation Harry, in a gruff and insecure tone, gave the order to light the portfire; the portfire, made of a mixture of brimstone, gunpowder and saltpetre, was sixteen inches long and would burn for fifteen minutes; that should be long enough to see them past this tricky twilight interval.

"What on earth is that?"

It was the Padre's voice floating eerily over the compound from the direction of the Cutcherry.

"When war shall cease...in...all...the...world..." concluded the Padre amid such a lugubrious howling of

pariah dogs that in spite of their excitement the two young men experienced a sudden dread.

"Look at the other bank!" Now that the sky had lightened one could distinguish silhouettes against it; for an instant it had seemed that a strong breeze was blowing through the melon-beds and setting them on the march, but the day's wind had not yet risen. Hardly had Fleury spoken when the rim of darkness beneath the horizon began to sparkle like a firework and immediately the air about them began to sing and howl with flying metal and chips of masonry...then in a wave came the sound. Daubs of orange hopped at regular intervals from one end of the rim of darkness to the other. Suddenly, a shrapnel shell landed on the corner of the verandah and all was chaos.

Harry had been on the point of giving the order to fire but he had been plucked from Fleury's side and was grovelling somewhere in the darkness.

"Fire!" shouted Fleury, but the pensioner who was holding the portfire merely looked towards him apologetically and sank to the ground where he lay like an empty suit of clothes.

"How terrible!' muttered Fleury helplessly. The verandah was littered with dead pensioners, or what looked like bits of pensioners, it was hard to be sure in the gloom. The two Sikhs lolled against each other, stone dead, with what could have been blood but was probably only *pan* juice trickling from their mouths. Barlow, though he still had his hands in his pockets and was still looking disaffected, had been blown off his chair and was lying on his side. Hardly a minute of the engagement had elapsed and as far as Fleury could see only two pensioners were still alive, and they appeared to be the very oldest and most infirm of the contingent. And still they had managed to fire no shot. While Harry was still struggling ineffectually to get to his feet Fleury grasped the portfire stick and touched it to the vent of the cannon; a jet of flame issued from the muzzle and there was a crash that made the whole verandah quake and set a shower of stone chips and fragments of mortar dancing on the flagstones. In a second or two there appeared out of nowhere against the bright dawning sky a black ball sailing towards the dark rim of melon beds, into which it presently vanished with no visible effect whatsoever.

"Are you alright, Harry?"

"Just winded," grunted Harry, though in fact a flying brick had struck him a painful blow in the groin; for a moment he had thought his entire trunk had been sliced off, pictures of his dear mother and, less appropriately, of Lucy in her chemise, had crowded before his drowning eyes as he prepared to die; then he realized that no actual damage had been done; he was holding his genitals cupped in his hand for they were too painful to massage.

"Almost everybody appears to be dead," shouted Fleury in a discouraged tone. The noise of musket fire from the rampart on each side was so great that he could not hear Harry's reply but saw that he was pointing at Barlow. Barlow was alive and appeared uninjured. They picked him up and sat him on his chair again. Once more Harry's mouth began to move, this time with an expression of frenzied excitement on his face. Again he pointed, this time over the balustrade.

The day had brightened enough for them to pick out shadowy detail in the landscape. What they saw, six or seven hundred yards away, was more than enough to cause Harry's excitement. Sepoys were swarming through the melon beds and down towards the far bank of the river. But this was all wrong. The sepoys were not supposed to attack from the south. The south was the one cardinal point from which the Residency was defensible; from the others, all the sepoys had to do, practically, was to step over a low wall and slit your throat. And yet the south was where they were coming from (what Harry and Fleury did not yet know was that they were coming from the other cardinal points as well). Without their British officers, of course, the sepoys were likely to commit the most extraordinary follies, such as attacking impregnable positions (never mind for the moment the Redan at Sebastopol).

It was true that the banqueting hall was the most easily defensible corner of the enclave; all the same, it required men to defend it. There were a dozen indigo planters and Eurasian civilians scattered sparsely behind the low earthen wall on each side of the battery. If the native cavalry attacked here, and even if they did not, these men could be easily overrun by a moderately determined assault, in spite of the three hundred yards of open ground which the attacking infantry would have to cross.

One thing had become clear to Harry: the cannon was going to be crucial. It was the one factor that could compensate for the lack of rifles and bayonets. If that first, unlucky shell-burst had not obliterated so many of the pensioners at least they might have been able to serve the cannon adequately; but now there were only two pensioners left. They were making weak efforts to drag the bodies of their comrades back from the verandah and stack them against the lolling Sikhs. Harry ordered one of the remaining pensioners to take a message to the Collector asking for more men; he doddered away, attempting to whip his limbs into a gallop.

Fleury had not been paying attention when the cannon was loaded; the beginnings of an epic poem had been simmering in his brain. Although he did not know it he had just fired a round shot into the sepoy encampment which lay out of sight beyond the melon beds. A round shot is all very well for a steady artillery exchange or for reducing defences, but it is no good for stopping an infantry charge; it does not kill enough people simultaneously for that. What you need is canister or grape. Harry had no shortage of canister for the occasion. But what worried him was how they were going to fire it.

Nine men were needed to serve a cannon if you include those attending the limber and the ammunition wagon; it was difficult to serve without at least five men. But Harry, Fleury and the other elderly pensioner,

Ram, set to work in a frenzy. Ram was very thin and tall, and his white mustaches drooped almost to the medals on his tunic; but fortunately he had served in the artillery and knew what he was about. So they divided up the work as best they could, Harry commanding and laying the gun, Fleury spongeing, Ram loading and serving the ammunition; then Fleury or Harry would prime the vent and, after Ram had fired it, clear it with the drift.

They were very slow at first. Fleury did not know what he was doing and they had to keep shouting at him, and Ram was really too old to carry ammunition as well as load it. But then Harry remembered Barlow who was still sitting on his chair with his hands in his pockets. Now that it was daylight you could see that Barlow's face had turned a fearful grey, but somehow Harry got him on his feet and carrying ammunition. He only had to carry it a few yards, from the banqueting hall to the gun emplacement, but in these few yards there was no protection offered by the marble heads of Plato and Socrates, and musket balls kept droning by his nose and tugging at his garments.

Not only did Harry have to organize his amateurish team of gunners, he also had to direct his fire so that it had the most damaging effect; this involved a calculation of variables that could be extremely complicated: the weight of the powder charge, the degree of elevation of the gun, whether the shot to be fired was solid or powder-filled, all these considerations could make a crucial difference to where the shot landed. But Harry had practised this sort of thing so often he did not even have to calculate: he knew by instinct that with a two-pound charge and an elevation of one degree he could drop a shell in the river bed where the sepoys swarmed as thick as flies on a treacle pudding.

Fleury found himself looking at Harry, whom he had always condescended to think rather dull, with new eyes as he watched him making some delicate but fatal adjustment to the handles of the elevating screw. Fleury was confronted, as he toiled clumsily with the spongeing rod in the dust and smoke, with a simple fact about human nature which he had never considered before: nobody is *superior* to anyone else, he only may be better at doing a specific thing. Doubtless, Coleridge or Keats or Lamartine would have been as clumsy with the sponge as he was himself...but wait, had not Lamartine been a military man? With French poets you could never tell. He stepped back, his ears ringing as the cannon crashed again. He could not remember.

"Fleury, for God's sake!" shouted Harry, who knew how desperate the situation was. Fleury did not know; he was in a daze from the noise and smoke which had tears streaming down his face, and the haze of dust which hung everywhere, very fine, lending the scene a "historical" quality because everything appeared faintly blurred, as in a Crimean daguerrotype. Fleury found himself appending captions to himself for the *Illustrated London News*. "This was the Banqueting Hall Redoubt in the Battle of Krishnapur. On the left, Mr Fleury, the poet, who conducted himself so gallantly throughout; on the right, Lieutenant Dunstaple, who commanded the Battery, and a faithful native, Ram."

"Fleury!" shouted Harry desperately. But Fleury's mind *would* keep wandering; the trouble was that being ignorant of military matters he only had a vague idea of what was going on; all he knew for certain was that he was spongeing a gun and, after a while, his stunned senses refused to find that very interesting. He skidded suddenly as he was dashing to clear the vent for Harry and sat down on the flagstones. Only then did he realize that he had skidded in a great lake of blood which had leaked out of the pile of bodies and spread over the verandah.

Harry knew that they needed a miracle...that is, if the Collector did not send any more men with rifles and bayonets to reinforce the handful at the rampart. They needed another cannon, too, preferably a twelve-pounder, and a mortar to drop shells under the near bank of the river. What looked to Fleury like two or three hundred dim figures in a dust storm wandering aimlessly on the far bank a quarter of a mile away, had a precise meaning for Harry. He knew exactly what was happening: the sepoys were massing under the near bank before making an attack. The only thing that puzzled him was why they were taking so long about it.

By this time the sun had risen and the hot wind was beginning to blow, but still the sepoys delayed their assault. While they waited for it Major Hogan suddenly reeled out on to the verandah and steadied himself with a hand on the door-frame. He had had a terrible night, but the morning had been worse; every time the six-pounder fired it drove hot needles through his ears. Now he had got himself on to his feet, however, and was coming to take command of his men. He could see by the pile of bodies that they needed him.

Harry greeted Major Hogan's appearance with dismay; it was not simply that he himself was no longer in command; he knew Hogan to be incompetent. What slender chance they had of holding the position vanished with Hogan giving the orders.

Now Hogan, having rallied himself, opened his mouth to give his first order; his brown teeth parted, but as they did so a musket ball vanished between them into his open mouth; his eyes bulged, he appeared to swallow it, then he dropped conveniently near to the other bodies, the back of his skull shattered. Harry and Fleury exchanged a glance but said nothing.

It was nine o'clock and the heat was becoming unbearable; the chase of the cannon could not be touched; if a drop of water fell on it from Fleury's sponge it sizzled away in an instant. The flagstones shimmered and the lake of blood where Fleury had slipped had become a sticky brown marsh sucking at every footstep. Once Fleury trod on something which squashed beneath his foot and he thought with horror: "Someone's eye!" He hardly dared to look down. But it was merely one of the Kabul grapes which Barlow had been eating.

Harry could tell that Fleury and Ram would not be able to go on much longer without a break: Ram

because he was old, Fleury because he was inexperienced. Fleury had begun to have a shattered look; he kept his eyes away from the sticky mass and wisps of steam rising from it, and from the bodies. The shock, aided by the noise and heat, was taking hold of him. So Harry gave the order to stop firing; in any case it was time they moved the bodies out of the sun.

While the others rested in the shade, Harry went out again with his telescope; he had considered dragging the gun from one position to another in order to give the impression that they had more than one cannon in the battery. But a brass six-pounder weighs seventeen hundredweight: the prospect of getting it off its trunnions and on to the limber, dragging it to a new position, unlimbering, firing, limbering up once more, and going through the whole process again, quickly enough, and in such heat, with only four men was simply too much to contemplate.

It seemed to him that he could see movement above the rim of the near bank of the river; a green flag was being swept slowly back and forth in the hot breeze and at the same time a faint beating of drums came to his ears. The attack was coming at last. As he turned to order the others back to the cannon, the pensioner whom he had sent to the Collector hurried towards him, saluted and told him that the Collector Sahib could send no men or guns at present. “Collector Sahib very sorry and send this gentleman, Sahib.” Harry looked at the figure who had followed the pensioner diffidently out on to the verandah. It was the Collector’s manservant, Vokins.

Vokins gazed at him unhappily for a moment, but then a spent musket ball came humming through the air, struck the brickwork beside him and rolled towards his feet. He recoiled as if it were a scorpion, and fled back into the darkness of the banqueting hall to cower in a pile of bedding. But as his eyes grew accustomed to the gloom he became aware that this pile of bedding was, in fact, a pile of bodies, the result of the morning’s work. After a brief debate with himself he decided it was best to venture outside again among the living.

11

The Collector was certainly worried about the banqueting hall; if he had only sent Vokins it was not because he doubted that Lieutenant Dunstaple was in difficulties, it was because the other three batteries and every inch of the rampart were in difficulties too. At first he had considered sending men from the Residency; the firing from the direction of the native town had been weak at first. It had even seemed as if the sepoys might be short of ammunition because they had been firing nails, bits of ramrod, even stones. But the fire had grown heavier and a twelve-pounder had begun to send round shot crashing through the upper storeys; then the enemy infantry had advanced into the native houses of dried mud surrounding the site of the demolished mosque. He cursed himself for not having had them levelled too; what he had not realized was that earth makes better material for fortification than masonry, which shatters, cracks and sends out splinters like shrapnel.

Soon after nine o’clock the Collector set out for the Cutcherry to see how they were getting on there. He took a cane and a pith helmet; in the buttonhole of his coat he wore a pink rose which one of the ladies had given him the evening before. He was pleased with the rose; it helped him to appear calm and cheerful. Now that the defence of the Residency had begun his main function must be to keep up the morale of the garrison. With this in mind he walked over to the Cutcherry as if he were going for a morning stroll, paying no attention whatsoever to the musket balls which sometimes droned by. He even paused on the way to inspect the odd collection of animals that had gathered to shelter from the sun in the shadow of the Church.

They were dogs mainly, but there was also a mongoose or two and even a monkey with a bell round its neck and a sailor cap fastened to its head with elastic. The Collector thought he recognized one of the dogs as belonging to Dr Dunstaple from having seen it run against one of his own dogs (Towser, 1852–55, much loved but now dead and buried beside the sundial with a little gravestone all of his own, RIP) at a meeting of the North of India Coursing Club. This dog of the Doctor’s, Towser’s former adversary, was a brown mongrel…although he had run remarkably fast and close, the Collector recalled, and had even jerked the hare, in the end he had let her go and she had escaped into a sugar-cane khet. So there had been no kill. But now he seemed to recognize the Collector for he sat up among the other somnolent dogs, amongst whom Chloë was dozing, and gave a little bark, staring up at him with intelligent brown eyes as he moved on.

A few yards away, still in the shadow of the Church, was another collection of dogs, uncivilized ones this time and dreadful to behold. In spite of the years he had spent in the East the Collector had never managed to get used to the appearance of the pariah dogs. Hideously thin, fur eaten away by mange to the raw skin, endlessly and uselessly scratching, timorous, vicious, and very often half crippled, they seemed like a parody of what Nature had intended. He had once, as it happened, on landing for the first time at Garden Reach in Calcutta, had the same thought about the human beggars who swarmed at the landing-stage; they, too, had seemed a parody. Yet when the Collector piously gave to the poor, it was to the English poor, by a fixed arrangement with his agent in London; he had accepted that the poverty of India was beyond redemption. The humans he had got used to, in time…the dogs never.

A musket ball striking a puff of dust from the Church wall reminded him of his duties, however, and he passed on towards the Cutcherry with a dignified step, thinking that the pets, too, had been a mistake…he

should never have allowed them into the enclave. There was no ration for dogs...nor, come to that, for monkeys or mongooses; they would all starve unless relief came soon...or their masters would share their own food with them and all would starve together. It would have been better to have shot them all. But a civilized man does not shoot his dog...his "best friend". Yes, but these were exceptional circumstances. Now there was even talk of shooting wives if the situation became hopeless, to spare them a worse fate at the hands of the sepoys.

The dogs, both pets and pariahs, slumbered on uneasily, tongues lolling in the great heat, while the Collector disappeared on his way towards the rattle of rifle fire and the crashing of artillery. A little later, if they had had the energy to lift their heads from their paws, they might have seen him coming back. He looked just the same, more or less, though now he was walking more quickly and did not pause to notice them. The pink rose he was wearing had withered in his buttonhole in the few minutes it had been exposed to the hot wind and sun.

He went straight to his study when he got back to the Residency, closed the door and drank off a glass of brandy. He had done what he had intended: he had made a confident tour of the Cutcherry buildings; he had spoken encouragingly to the men firing through the windows from behind stacks of records and documents (an excellent protection from musket fire); he had visited the half dozen wounded who had been removed to the Magistrate's office until they could be conveyed to the library in the Residency, where the hospital had been provisionally established; he had even gone outside to speak to the men at the rampart. But now he needed to marshal his courage again.

He was standing at his desk with the empty glass in his hand when a stray musket ball ricocheted off " *The Spirit of Science Conquers Ignorance and Prejudice*" by the window. He instantly dropped to the floor in fear. He could hear that musket ball droning about the room, lethally bisecting it again and again like a billiard ball going from one cushion to another. He remained crouching there for a long time before he was able to convince himself that it was quite impossible, physically speaking, scientifically speaking, for a musket ball to go on and on ricocheting like that in a rectangular room; it could only be his imagination. So he forced himself to stand up again and suffered no ill-effects; a small but significant triumph for the scientific way of looking at things. Presently he felt sufficiently restored to make another confident sortie, this time to encourage the men in Dunstaple's battery.

12

"Save, Lord, or else we perish. The living, the living, shall praise thee..."

At the banqueting hall the little garrison was standing to arms, waiting for the enemy assault. Loaded Enfield rifles had been propped against the balustrade and the cannon loaded with canister. While they waited Harry had been giving some elementary instruction in the use of the Enfield rifle to Fleury, Barlow and Vokins; he had explained that this rifle was the 1853 model, three grooves, with a cartridge of two and a half drams exploded by percussion cap. To hit a human figure at 100 yards you aim at the waist. At 150 yards raise the sliding bar, raise the sight and aim with the 200 yards point at the thigh. At 200 yards aim at the waist with the 200 yards point. At 300 yards aim at the waist with the three hundred yards point. Any questions? No, there did not seem to be any questions. Vokins's teeth were chattering in spite of the heat and he looked like someone in whose mind thighs and waists and percussion caps and sliding bars had become inextricably entangled. Fleury, his mind a hopeless jumble of figures, was wool-gathering again, though trying to look politely interested, and was vaguely trying out various poses in his mind for daguerrotypes to appear in the *Illustrated London News*. Only Barlow seemed to have been taking an intelligent interest.

"How do you judge distances?" asked Harry disagreeably. "I suppose you all must know since nobody had any questions." They all looked chastened so Harry explained. At 1300 yards good eyesight can distinguish infantry from cavalry. A single individual detached may be seen at 1000 yards but his head does not appear as a round ball until 700 yards, at which distance white cross-belts and white trousers may be seen. At 500 yards the face may be seen as a light coloured spot and limbs, uniform and firelocks can be made out. At 250 and 200 yards details of body and uniform are tolerably clear. "Or alternatively, Vokins, you multiply the number of seconds which elapse between the time of seeing the flash of the enemy's musket and hearing the report by 1100 and the product will be the distance in feet. Have you got that?"

"And the product will be the distance in feet," mumbled Vokins impressively, but with an air of complete incomprehension. He was spared any further inquisition by the sudden appearance of the Padre.

The Padre was looking more haggard and wild-eyed than ever. He had thought that he would never be able to reach the banqueting hall because he had had to cross the stretch of open lawn swept by musket fire and grape which lay between the Church and the hall and which he had thought of as the Slough of Despond. How naked one feels and how small! Crossing such a piece of land, like navigating the rocks, reefs and shoals of life, one feels that of oneself one is nothing. One's only protection is in the Lord. The living, the living, shall praise thee! The Lord had been like a strong shield to him and had covered his head in the day of battle.

The Padre explained all this and more to the little garrison. They were glad of prayers. They felt that the more prayers they heard the better. But they became a little impatient as the Padre rambled on about Sin.

What he said was true, no doubt, but they had the enemy to think of...It was rather like having someone keep asking you the time when your house is on fire. They found it hard to give him their whole attention.

But something else was rankling in the Padre's mind. This was the thought that, if they were being punished now, as Sodom and Gomorrah had been punished, it might be because there was not only Sin but Heresy in their midst. And so he led Fleury into the banqueting hall, asked him to kneel while he said a prayer over the pile of bodies, and then asked him why he had objected to hearing God described as the designer of the world.

"Do you not think that God designed the world and everything that is in it?"

"Well," said Fleury, "it's not exactly that I don't believe it..." With the Padre's blue, unblinking eyes fixed on him he found it hard to collect his thoughts. The Padre waited in silence for Fleury to continue. They had closed the doors and windows against the hot wind but the heat was no less intense. A cloud of flies surrounded each of them, battling constantly to land on their faces. They could hear the sound of boots on the flagstones outside and the occasional crack of a musket, but within even the flies were silent.

"If you believe, as you must, that God designed the world and everything in it, then why should you not proclaim it? Why should you not praise Him for these wonders He has created? I'm sure you read Paley at school."

"But I think," blurted Fleury suddenly, "that God has nothing to do with that sort of thing...God is a movement of the heart, of the spirit, or conscience...of every generous impulse, virtue and moral thought."

"Can you deny the indications of contrivance and design to be found in the works of nature...contrivance and design which far surpasses anything we human beings are capable of? How d'you explain such indications? How d'you explain the subtle mechanism of the eye, infinitely more complex than the mere telescope that miserable humanity has been able to invent? How d'you explain the eel's eye, which might be damaged by burrowing into mud and stones and is therefore protected by a transparent horny covering? How is it that the iris of a fish's eye does not contract? Ah, poor, misguided youth, it is because the fish's eye has been designed by Him who is above all, to suit the dim light in which the fish makes his watery dwelling!"

A terrifying crash shook the building as a round shot struck the outside wall and brought down a shower of bricks, followed by a fine sprinkling of dust which sparkled in the thin beams of sunlight. But the Padre paid no attention to it.

"How d'you explain the Indian Hog?" he cried. "How d'you account for its two bent teeth, more than a yard long, growing upwards from its upper jaw?"

"To defend itself?"

"No, young man, it has two tusks for that purpose issuing from the lower jaw like those of a common boar...No, the answer is that the animal sleeps standing up and, in order to support its head, it hooks its upper tusks on the branches of trees...for the Designer of the World has given thought even to the hog's slumbers!"

Hardly had the Padre's voice ceased to echo when Fleury heard a shout from outside and the sound of rifle fire from the rampart.

"Look here, I'm afraid I shall have to go!" shouted Fleury excitedly, dashing for the door. But the Padre sprang after him, crying: "Think of the stomach of the camel! Adapted to carry large quantities of water which it needs for the desert regions through which it frays its diurnal passage."

Blinded by the glare, Fleury groped for his sponge and took up his position at the cannon. The Padre, too, came out and stood there, as dazzled as a fish in bright light, muttering, as if to himself: "Think of the milk of the viviparous female!" Fleury pulled him down hurriedly into the protection of the philosophers; it occurred to him that the Padre had perhaps become delirious from heat and exhaustion.

But whether he was delirious or not, Harry needed practical as well as spiritual assistance from the Padre; so he dragged him to his feet again and set him to work with Vokins serving ammunition; Barlow and the second native pensioner, Mohammed, he ordered to take up positions on the verandah with rifles, while Fleury and Ram waited to take up sponge and ramrod once more. Now the rifle fire from the rampart to right and left of their position redoubled; the sepoys could be seen swarming over the near bank of the river as they began their assault. Harry and Fleury had laid their sabres beside them on the parapet; they had decided that should their defences be overrun they would sell their lives as dearly as possible, rather than trying to bolt for it...Fleury had succeeded (but only with difficulty) in overcoming certain qualms as to whether selling one's life as dearly as possible, or even putting it up for sale at all, was, in fact, the wisest course.

Although the enemy were now plainly in sight and advancing steadily over the open ground Harry held his fire. Canister shot consists of lead balls loosely packed into cylindrical tin canisters, whose tops are soldered on, and bottoms nailed to a wooden shoe to prevent "windage" (that is, the escape of the propellant gases around the shot); although very destructive from a hundred to two hundred yards, at a distance of more than three hundred the shot scatter so much as to be almost useless. Fleury did not know this and kept glancing at Harry, wondering what he was waiting for. He felt tired, lightheaded, thirsty, and wretched; now that he could see the glinting sabres of the sepoy cavalry he did not feel nearly as brave as he had expected. He was further unnerved by the Padre who in spite of their predicament, or even because of it, had not ceased to mutter urgent evidence of the Designer's telltale hand...The instinct which causes butterflies to lay their eggs on cabbages which, not the butterfly itself, but the caterpillar from its egg, requires for nourishment. (But, wondered Fleury, distraught, why had the Designer not simply designed butterflies to eat cabbages too?)

The Padre's eyes searched Fleury's troubled countenance for signs that his resistance was beginning to weaken. For the Padre could not help imagining a situation where the combined Sin of the garrison hung in the balance against such virtue as they could muster made heavier by the Grace and Mercy of God. In this situation Fleury's refusal to acknowledge His patent could only displease the Inventor and would doubtless weigh very heavy indeed on the side of Sin. If the Padre could shift that weight, perhaps, who could say? the scales might tip against the sepoys.

"Think how the middle claw of the heron and cormorant is notched like a saw! Why? Because these birds live by catching fish and the serrated edges help them to hold their slippery prey!"

Now a stomach-turning howl rose from the advancing natives; the *sowars* spurred forward, the infantry broke into a trot, bayonets at the ready; behind them a curtain of yellow dust climbed into the heat-distorted air. At two hundred yards Harry gave Ram the order to fire; once again there was a crash that sent the debris dancing on the flagstones; but this time there was no round shot or shrapnel shell to be seen sailing towards the river...only a solid-looking ball of smoke driven from the muzzle by a jet of flame. Yet now they saw the dreadful effect as the oncoming men and horses were sprayed with the invisible lead balls. The fierce cry became swollen with the shrieks of the wounded...The charge faltered, then continued as the wave of dust rolled forward and swallowed up the scene of carnage.

They worked desperately to re-load the cannon. Fleury sponged and then primed the vent with a shaking hand that scattered powder everywhere, while the Padre, his puny ecclesiastical arms scarcely able to heft such a burden, handed the morbid canister to Ram, and Harry spun the elevating screw until it marked point blank.

But how few seconds it takes a galloping horseman to cover two hundred yards! Already, by the time Harry, grabbing the portfire in his excitement, had touched it to the vent, the leading *sowars* had ridden under the muzzle and were spurring along the rampart lopping the heads off Eurasians and planters as if they had been dandelions. But again the gun vomited its metal meal into the faces of the advancing sepoys, this time into the very midst of their cavalry. Men and horses melted into the ground like wax at the touch of its searing breath. Death, whirring on its great pinions high above, plummeted down to seize its prey.

Again they wrenched and prodded and fumbled to load the six-pounder. Fleury's hand was now shaking so much that he seemed to spray priming powder everywhere but in the vent and Harry prayed that there would be enough to fire the charge, for if it failed there would be no second chance. He could now see the silhouettes of the sepoy infantry as they plunged through the veil of dust with sparkling bayonets.

"Even among insects God has not left himself without witness," wailed the Padre. "Is not the proboscis of the bee designed for drawing nectar from flowers?"

Harry touched the portfire to the vent and in front of the rampart the advancing infantry, like the legs of a monstrous millipede whose body was hidden in the dust cloud above them, collapsed all together, writhed, and lay still. The men behind who were still on their feet hesitated, unable to see what lay ahead of them in the dust. All they could see was the looming shape of the banqueting hall and, startling in their clarity, two vast, white faces, calmly gazing towards them with expressions of perfect wisdom, understanding and compassion. The sepoys quailed at the sight of such invincible superiority.

"Come on," shouted Harry, and grasping their sabres he and Fleury blundered through the dark banqueting hall and out into the light again. Here they were met with a terrible sight, two *sowars* were in the act of cleaving the skull of the last of the Eurasian defenders. Harry grasped a riderless horse, swung himself into the saddle and charged headlong as the two *sowars* turned away from their fatal business; but they were both ready for him and both cut at him simultaneously as he was sent flying by the momentum with which his horse came into contact with theirs. One cut missed, the other laid open his tunic at the breast. He lay still and the *sowars* turned away, leaving him for dead. Meanwhile, in unmilitary fashion, Fleury had come hareing up behind them on tiptoe and now he dealt the nearest a blow in the face which dropped him from his horse. The other *sowar* promply spurred after Fleury with his lance, driving his horse up the steps of the banqueting hall, chasing him in and out of the "Greek" pillars and then down the steps again, so close that Fleury could feel the horse's nostrils hot on his neck. On the bottom step Fleury stumbled opportunely as the man drove forward with his lance; at the same time he managed to grasp the lance and drag the man out of the saddle. His head and shoulder hit the ground with such force that his collar-bone snapped and he was dragged away screaming over the rampart by the stirrups to vanish into the cloud of dust.

Fleury now was gasping for breath, but ready to congratulate himself. He sat down on the bottom step with his head between his knees trying to recover. Looking up, however, he found a giant, bearded sepoy standing a yard in front of him, his sabre already raised to despatch him...somehow he managed to parry the blow and struck at the sepoy, but the sepoy turned his sabre with ease, twisted it out of his hand and threw it away, grinning. Fleury unhopefully punched at the bearded face with his bare fists, an attack which unfortunately passed unnoticed by the sepoy who was busy preparing to deal a death blow with his own sabre. Fleury, too weak to run, watched his adversary fascinated. The sepoy seemed to swell as he drew back his sword; he grew larger and larger until it seemed that his tunic, on which Fleury could see the unfaded marks left from where he had ripped the insignia of his rank in the Company's army, must burst; his face grew redder and redder as he raised his sabre in both hands, as if his motive were not merely to kill Fleury but to chop him in two, lengthwise, with one stroke. But the stroke was never delivered. Instead, he removed his eyes from Fleury's

terrified face and dropped them to his own stomach, for a bright tip of metal had suddenly sprung out of it, a little to the right of his belly button. Both he and Fleury stared at it in astonishment. And then the sepoy stopped swelling and began to shrivel. Soon he was normal size again. But he continued to shrivel until, suddenly, he dropped out of sight revealing Harry's rather earnest features peering at Fleury to see if he was alright.

"I think we've got rid of them all for the time being," he said, putting a foot in the small of the sepoy's back to withdraw his sabre. "The infantry turned, thank Heaven!"

"Think how apt fins are to water, wings to air, how well the earth suits its inhabitants!" exclaimed the Padre, suddenly appearing at Fleury's side as if conjured up by this reference to Heaven. "In everything on earth we see evidence of design. Turn from your blindness, I beg you in His name. Everything, from fish's eye, to caterpillar's food, to bird's wing and gizzard, bears manifest evidence of the Supreme Design. What other explanation can you find for them in your darkness?"

Fleury stared at the Padre, too harrowed and exhausted to speak. Could it not be, he wondered vaguely, trembling on the brink of an idea that would have made him famous, that somehow or other fish designed their own eyes?

But no, that was, of course, quite impossible. So he submitted to the Padre. But although the evidence of Divine Design could not seriously be questioned, he still thought...well, it was more a matter of feeling really...But the Padre was too overjoyed that Fleury's ears should have at last been opened to the truth to listen to his equivocations about feelings and emotions. He sank down, his knees using the chest of the bearded sepoy as a hassock, and gave thanks, for the sepoys had been repulsed at every quarter.

"We gat not this by our own sword," he sang in explanation, "neither was it our own arm that saved us: but thy right hand, and thine arm, and the light of thy countenance, because thou hadst a favour unto us."

13

The Collector had risen a little before dawn. While eating breakfast in the company of his two eldest daughters he made one or two brief, factual entries in his diary under the heading of the previous day, Thursday, 11 June. Breakfast was the main meal of the day and consisted of roast mutton, chapatis, rice and jam. As it stood, the ration of meat, bone included, was sixteen ounces for the men and twelve for the ladies and children, together with an allowance of rice, flour and *dal* for those, now the majority, who had no provisions of their own. Under the date of 12 June, which was today, the Collector recorded his intention to consult Mr Rayne, who was in charge of the Commissariat, about a possible further reduction of the ration. He was coming to realize that in the end it might be hunger rather than the sepoy cannons which proved their undoing. Leaderless, the various contingents of sepoys were finding it increasingly difficult to mount concerted attacks. "Settle trouble among the ladies," he added beneath the note about rations.

With ladies still in his mind he went through into the dressing-room to comb his mustache and pour oil on the stormy sea of his side-whiskers. By this time it was broad daylight and the hot wind which made the day unbearable was already sighing through the rooms and corridors of the Residency; from the window of the dressing-room he could see the horses of the Sikh cavalry, tethered in the lee of the verandah to protect them from sun and shot beginning to stamp restlessly as the first gusts swirled round them. "Poor beasts. This is none of their quarrel."

He tied his cravat with care, plumping it out with his fingers and fastening it with a Madras pearl; as he did so he remembered with displeasure that Vokins was not there to brush his coat and help him on with it. His displeasure increased as he passed through again into the bedroom and caught sight of his daughters, Eliza and Margaret, with whom he had just taken breakfast, already looking alarmed on his behalf, for they had come to dread his daily tours of the ramparts which now took up the whole day and very often did not finish until after dark. He noticed with irritation that the brass telescope with which they kept an anxious watch for him from the window as he made his rounds had been laid on the table in readiness for the day.

As he went to the chest in which he had ordered their personal store of food to be kept, he thought, baffled, that it was absurd, all this emotion! Although, of course, it was right that they should love and respect him as their father, what did they really know of him? His real self was a perfect stranger to them. "May I always accept Papa's decisions with a good heart, without seeking to oppose them with my own will," one of them (it was a symptom of his difficulty that he could not remember which) had written piously in her diary. This dutiful phrase had surprised him. It had never occurred to him that either of the girls had a will which might in any circumstances wish to oppose itself to his own. He often thought that he would have liked to understand them better, but how could he? "Is it my fault that they never reveal themselves to me?"

The Collector strode along the wide verandah towards the billiard room carrying a parcel and with the twin devotions of his daughters clinging to him like limpets. The billiard room was long enough to contain two tables end to end and still leave ample room for the players to move about without getting in each other's way; indeed, it would have been possible to fit a third table in without discomfort. At each end there was a tall window, for the room spanned the Residency, breadthways; the ceiling, very high for the sake of coolness, bore elaborate plaster mouldings of foliage in the English fashion. This had once been one of his favourite

rooms but now he dreaded to enter. Indeed, he had to pause a moment to compose himself for the inevitable assault on his senses.

Even before he had stepped over the threshold the first of his senses had come under attack. The noise in this room was deafening, especially if you compared it, as the Collector did, with how it used to be in the days when it had been reserved for billiards. Ah, then it had been like some gentle rustic scene...the green meadows of the tables, the brown leather of the chairs, and the gentlemen peacefully browsing amongst them. Then there had been no other sound but the occasional click of billiard balls or the scrape of someone chalking his cue. Above the green pastures the billowing blue clouds of cigar smoke had drifted gently by beneath the ceiling like the sky of a summer's day. But now, alas, the ears were rowelled by high-pitched voices raised in dispute or emphasis; the competition here was extreme for anyone with anything to say: it included a number of crying children, illicit parrots and mynah birds.

It was now the turn of his eyes to take offence. This room, so light, so airy, so nobly proportioned, had been utterly transformed by the invasion of the ladies. A narrow aisle led down the middle of the room to the first table, on which the two pretty Misses O'Hanlon had formed the habit of sleeping clasped in each other's arms; now they were sitting cross-legged on their bedding in chemises and petticoats playing some silly game which caused them every now and again to clasp their hands to their mouths, stifling mirthful shrieks. The aisle continued to the next table, which had only one occupant, old Mrs Hampton, the Padre's mother. She was very fat, short-sighted and almost helpless, unable to get off the table unaided. As the Collector entered she was sitting in her muddled bedding, peering unhappily around her as if marooned. On each side of the aisle charpoys or mattresses or both together had been set down higgledy-piggledy, in some cases partitioned off from their neighbours by sheets suspended from strings that ran from the wall to the chandeliers, or from one string to another. "Ah, the soft and milky rabble of womankind! How true!"

As he advanced down the aisle, not without difficulty because trunks, clothing, work-baskets and other possessions had overflowed into it from either side, a third of his senses was assaulted: this time his sense of smell...Near the door there was a powerful smell of urine from unemptied chamber-pots which thankfully soon gave way to a feminine smell of lavender and rose water...a scent which mingled with the smell of perspiration to irritate his senses. It made him conscious of the fact that many of the ladies were, when one thought about it, attractive young women, some of whom were only partly clothed or not wearing stockings, or perhaps still altogether unclothed behind their flimsy, inadequate screens. He advanced between them with a deliberately heavy and paternal step, glimpsing an occasional movement of white skin which, because it was not clear what part of the body it might belong to (and might, for all one could tell, belong to an intimate part), he could not help feeling aroused by. He thought sternly: "Really, they behave, here in their private territory, with as little modesty and restraint as, in public, with sobriety."

"Mrs Rayne," he boomed with a severity born of this unwelcome stimulation. "Could you please open the window? The doctors have ordered them to be left open during the day to guard against an epidemic from bad air and our cramped conditions." The authority of his tone silenced the chatter, but his words produced some faint moans of protest and rebellion. They were so hot already! If the hot wind was allowed to blow through the room it became intolerable. They could not suffer it! "And a mouse ran over me last night!" cried Miss Barlow, the daughter of the Salt Agent. "I felt its nasty, scratchy little feet on my face."

"The *dhobi* has begun to charge an outrageous price, Mr Hopkins," complained a sleepy voice from behind one of the hanging sheets. "Can nothing be done to stop him?"

The Collector, suspecting that this was the voice of the passive, lovely, pregnant, perpetually weary Mrs Wright, widow of a railway engineer, experienced another annoying twinge of desire, and after listening to some further grievances relieved his feelings by delivering an unusually stern homily.

The cause of the trouble among the ladies was, as he suspected, not simple but compound. Many of the ladies were now having to look after themselves for the first time in their lives. They had to fetch their own water from the well behind the Residency when they wanted to wash. They had to light fires for themselves (sometimes the old gentlemen from the drawing-room helped them in this but they took such a long time about it that the ladies found it almost easier to do it for themselves) and to boil their own kettles for tea. The two *dhobis* who had remained within the Residency enclave were now beginning to profit by their loyalty and had been able to treble their prices, it seemed, without diminishing their custom...those ladies unable, or unwilling, to pay such prices were having to wash their own clothing, and perhaps that of their menfolk as well. And now combine all these painful, unaccustomed chores with the conditions in which they were having to live...delicate creatures accustomed to punkahs and *khus tatties*, now exposed all day long to the hot wind which, incidentally, rendered the few punkahs still in motion quite useless! No wonder they were in such a poor frame of mind.

There were other grievances, however. One of the older ladies, Mrs Rogers, had been turned out of the private room she had been sharing with her husband to make way for a lady expecting her confinement, and she was very cross indeed at finding herself in the middle of what she did not hesitate to call, echoing the Collector's own thoughts, "a rabble". The ladies in the billiard room had divided themselves into groups according to the ranks of husbands or fathers. Mrs Rogers, who was the wife of a judge, found herself unable to join any of the groups because of her elevated rank, and so she was in danger of starving to death immediately, for to make things easier rations were issued collectively, a fact which had undoubtedly

hastened this social stratification. The Collector had to address Mrs Rogers personally and in the hearing of the other ladies on the subject of the "unusual circumstances" which required certain sacrifices...but he knew very well that Mrs Rogers, having established at least symbolically her superior social position, would be only too glad now to join more lowly ladies. For up to now the deference to which she was entitled, but which she had found difficulty in exacting, had been a dreadful weight in these "unusual circumstances" for poor Mrs Rogers to carry.

But all was not harmony even within these groups for in the most lowly of them the Collector had to settle one of the most serious problems of all; this was caused by the fact that the spoiled Mrs Lacy, who although not yet nineteen was already a widow (her husband having been killed at Captainganj), had a Portuguese maid. A row had developed because Mrs Lacy had felt justified in keeping her maid occupied exclusively with her own comfort, while the other ladies believed that the girl's services should be shared. The Collector found Mrs Lacy in tears, the ladies round her looking sulky, and the Portuguese girl looking distressed to be the cause of so much strife. The Collector was not troubled by the democratic notion that in the "unusual circumstances" the Portuguese girl might have enough on her hands simply looking after herself; he solved the problem by a judicious division of the girl's labours. She should do certain things for the group in common, certain things for Mrs Lacy alone. Mrs Lacy dried her red eyes, satisfied that her honour at least had been vindicated.

Lucy Hughes provided a problem which the Collector was unable to solve. She was ostracized even by the members of the lowest group, in fact, by everyone except Louise. The *charpoy* on which she had spread her bedding had been pushed to the very end of the room, beneath the oven blast of the open window. It was the only bed that had any space around it, for even Louise's bed, which was next to hers, stood at a small, but eloquent distance.

All the younger women except Lucy had crowded round him closely to hear him speak; Lucy sat alone on her bed, hugging her knees plaintively. She seemed to be close to tears and the Collector felt sorry for her...but he had so many other matters to think of. To make things more difficult his earlier stirrings of sensuality returned as he looked around the circle of young women who had come so close to him. Their flushed, rice-powdered faces gazed up at him trustingly, even provocatively...he felt that he had a power over them, even the most virtuous of them, for no other reason than that he was a man (any man in his position would have had this same power). He thought: "Crowding them together like this has a strange effect on them...it seems to excite their feminine nature."

Pleased with this scientific observation, he allowed himself for a moment to enjoy the sexual aura of which he was the centre and which was so strong that he could somehow feel, without actually having to touch them, the softness of these feminine bodies, clothed only in soft muslin or cotton and unprotected by the stays and spine-pads habitually worn even by the youngest of them outside the privacy of this room. But all too soon his conscience was awakened by the looks of disapproval cast in his direction by some of the older ladies, who had thought it improper to crowd close to him. So far his sense of touch had been exercised only in imagination but at this moment a round shot struck the outside wall in an adjoining room a few yards away. The sudden noise caused two of these young bodies to cling to him for a moment...and he could not restrain his large hands from comforting them. By the window a shower of brick dust slowly descended on Lucy's lonely head and she began to cry.

Now it was time for him to unwrap the parcel he had brought with him, which contained a large quantity of flour, suet and jam from his private Residency store. This was to be divided equally between the groups, so that each could make a roly-poly pudding. He watched in wonder the excitement that this announcement provoked, the eagerness with which the younger ladies set about dividing it up, laughing like children and clapping their hands in anticipation. "It's true," he mused, "they're just like children."

Sometimes they exasperated him with their vulnerability, their pettiness. But they lived such sheltered, useless lives, even their children were given to *ayahs* to look after. What could one expect of them? At the best of times they had so little to occupy their hands and minds. And now, during the siege, it was worse; whatever tendencies had already existed in the characters of those who made up the garrison, the siege had exaggerated (this was another pleasing scientific observation which he must remember to pass on to the Magistrate). "They wait all day for their husbands to come. They have no resources of their own."

His mission accomplished, he turned to leave. But his sense of taste, which had so far escaped the assault on the other four, was now confronted with a hastily brewed cup of tea in a child's christening mug (for lack of china) and a rock bun. He drank the tea and nibbled a little of the bun, but asked permission to save the rest to sustain him as he made his daily round. He took it with him, wrapped in a piece of paper, with the secret intention of giving it to the Doctor's mongrel, poor Towser's friend and rival of yester-year, if he met him during the day.

He slowly descended the stairs, no longer noticing the landslide of furniture, boxes, curios, antlers, rowing oars and other trophies, but thinking: "Women are weak, we shall always have to take care of them, just as we shall always have to take care of the natives; no doubt, there are exceptions...women of character like Miss Nightingale, but not unfortunately like Carrie or Eliza or Margaret...Even a hundred years from now..." the Collector feebly tried to imagine 1957..."it will still be the same. They are made of a softer substance. They arouse our desire, but they are not our equals."

As he went out on to the portico and down the steps the sunlight once again smote him painfully, like a solid substance. Above, at the bedroom window he knew that Eliza and Margaret would be weakly waiting with the brass telescope which they used throughout the livelong day to watch over him lest any harm should befall him as he made his leisurely progress round the defences.

Later in the morning the Collector found himself reclining in a mass of paper documents on the floor of the vernacular record room in the company of the Magistrate and of Fleury, who had been permitted a temporary absence from his post as no attack seemed imminent. A strange contentment had settled over the Collector, perhaps because his senses, usually kept under lock and key, had enjoyed their unaccustomed exercise that morning, perhaps because he was most comfortably supported by the documents. There were salt reports bound in red tape under each elbow; a voluminous, but extraordinarily comfortable correspondence with a local landowner concerning the Permanent Settlement cradled his back at just the right angle, and opium statistics, rising to a mound beneath his knees and cushioning the rest of his body, filled him with a sense of ease verging on narcosis. From outside, a few yards away, came the regular discharge of cannons and mortars; but inside, such was the thickness of the paper padding, one felt very safe indeed. True, daylight appeared in places where holes had been made by round shot in the brickwork, but even that could be looked on as an advantage for it provided ventilation and prevented pockets of bad air forming; elsewhere it had become necessary to burn camphor and brown paper.

The Collector had been discoursing in an objective way on the perplexing question of why, after a hundred years of beneficial rule in Bengal, the natives should have taken it into their heads to return to the anarchy of their ancestors. One or two mistakes, however serious, made by the military in their handling of religious matters, were surely no reason for rejecting a superior culture as a whole. It was as if, after the improving rule of the Romans, the Britons had decided to paint themselves with woad again. “After all, we’re not ogres, even though we don’t marry among the natives or adopt their customs.”

“I must take issue with the expression ‘superior culture’,” said Fleury; but neither of the older men paid any attention to him.

“The great majority of natives have yet to see the first sign of our superior culture,” said the Magistrate. “If they’re lucky they may have seen some red-faced youth from Haileybury or Addiscombe riding by once or twice in their lives.”

(“I say, ‘superior culture’ is a very doubtful proposition, but I think...”)

“Come, come, Tom, think of the system of justice that the Company has brought to India. Even if there were nothing else...”

“This justice is a fiction! In the Krishnapur district we have two magistrates for almost a million people. There are many districts where it’s worse.”

(“Look here, what I think...“)

“Things are not yet perfect, of course,” sighed the Collector. “All the same, I should go so far as to say that in the long run a superior civilization such as ours is irresistible. By combining our advances in science and in morality we have so obviously found the best way of doing things. Truth cannot be resisted! Er, that’s to say, not successfully,” the Collector added as a round shot struck the corner of the roof and toppled one of the pillars of the verandah.

“But what I think is this,” declared Fleury when the rubble had ceased to fall, determined at last to get his word in. “It’s wrong to talk of a ‘superior civilization’ because there isn’t such a thing. *All* civilization is bad. It mars the noble and natural instincts of the heart. Civilization is decadence!”

“What rubbish!”

“I have seldom heard such gibberish,” agreed the Collector, chortling as he got to his feet. “By the way, what on earth are you dressed like that for?”

Somewhat taken aback by the speed with which his theories had been dismissed, Fleury could not at first think what the Collector was talking about. All the same, he was indeed rather oddly dressed in a blue velvet smoking jacket and tasselled smoking cap. He had brought them out with him, assuming that in India, as in England, gentlemen wore such garments while smoking in order to protect their clothes and hair from a smell offensive to the ladies. It had turned out that in India no one took the trouble...one of the many ways, alas, in which Indian society failed to live up to the rigorous standards set at home. With the shortage of clothes becoming acute Harry had found himself unable to replace his ripped tunic, so Fleury had generously given him the “Tweedside”, which he had taken a fancy to and which, in any case, Fleury had been finding oppressively warm...not that the smoking jacket was much cooler. As for the tasselled cap, he had improved it by attaching a flannel flap to the back to protect his neck from the sun, and a visor to the front, fashioned from the black cardboard binding of a book of sermons lent him by the Padre. The title of this book, inscribed in gothic letters of gold, glinted like braid as he accompanied the Collector out into the sunlight.

By contrast with the comfort of a few moments earlier the Collector suffered a painful return to reality as he stepped out into the glare. Worries, temporarily forgotten, assailed him once more...still no sign of a relieving force! The dwindling garrison...almost every day now someone was killed. The health of the garrison was beginning to deteriorate from the poor diet and lack of vegetables. Slight wounds became serious...from

serious wounds death was inevitable. He stood, blinking, outside the Cutcherry for a moment, appalled, unable to decide where to go next. But then, remembering that his daughters were very likely observing his dismay through the telescope and were perhaps even concluding that he had just been shot, he grasped Fleury by the arm and steered him towards the Residency; he needed someone's company to nerve himself for his daily visit to the hospital. Besides, he might take the opportunity to counter the demoralizing effect of the Magistrate's words on the young man's mind.

He began to say something about the principles behind a civilization being more important than the question of whether they were actually realized in a concrete manner...He had a firm grip on the arm of his audience, too, which is usually helpful when you have an argument to put across. But he found himself finishing what he had to say rather lamely, partly because Fleury was sulking over the rapid rejection of his own theories and refused to agree with him, partly because they were both chased into the lee of the hospital by an enemy rocket which careered down at them in wild loops out of the sky and, for an awful moment, seemed to be chasing them personally. Fortunately, it did not explode for it landed quite close to them, burying its cone-shaped iron head in the earth no more than ten yards away. Fleury indignantly began to prise it out of the earth with his sabre which was, perhaps, rather rash of him since smoke was still pouring from the vents in its case even if the fuse on its base appeared to be extinct. It was a six-pound Congreve rocket, one of many which had dived wildly into the enclave.

"One of the advantages of our civilization," said Fleury. But the Collector failed to grasp even this simple irony and observed mildly: "One of these days I'm afraid their rocketeers may hit something, if only by accident."

He continued to stand irresolutely beside the smoking rocket, thinking: "If we lose any more men we won't be able to man the defences adequately. Then we'll be in a pickle." At this moment Dr Dunstaple saw them through the window and sent a message out to ask Fleury if he would mind fetching half a dozen bottles of mustard from the Commissariat; he had another suspected case of cholera to deal with. Fleury hurried away and, after a short struggle with himself, the Collector made up his mind to enter the hospital.

The hospital had first been established in the Residency library, but this had proved too small and so it had been moved into the row of storehouses and stables immediately behind the Residency; this row of sheds had been roughly divided into two wards, one under the care of each doctor. Between the two wards what had, in happier days, been the saddle-room had been converted into an operating theatre where, surrounded by a mass of harness and saddlery, the two doctors united (at least, in principle) to perform amputations. Untidy stacks of *bhoosa* cattle feed piled up in the corners of the wards were another reminder that their former occupants had been quadrupeds and now provided a convenient refuge for rats and other vermin.

The door to Dr Dunstaple's ward stood open and even before the Collector had reached it the stench of putrefaction and chloroform had advanced to greet him. He moved forward, however, with an expression of good cheer on his face, while flies tried to crowd on to his smiling lips and eyes and swarmed thirstily on to his sweating forehead. At the far end of the ward he glimpsed the Padre kneeling in prayer beside a supine figure. As he passed into the acute stench rising from the nearest bed he clenched his fists in his pockets and prayed: "Please God, if I'm to die may I be killed outright and not have to lie in this infernal place!"

Dr Dunstaple, still waiting for Fleury to return with the bottles of mustard, had seen the Collector and came bustling forward, saying in a loud, exasperated tone: "Heaven knows what experiment that damn fella's up to now! Whatever it is, I wash my hands of it!"

The Collector gave him a worried look. In the few days since the siege had begun a disturbing change had come over the Doctor. In normal times the Collector found this fat little man endearing and slightly ridiculous. His arms and legs looked too short for his round body; his energy made you want to laugh. But recently his plump, good-humoured face had set into lines of bad temper and bitterness. His rosy complexion had taken on a deeper, unhealthy flush, and although clearly exhausted, he was, nevertheless, in a constant state of frenetic activity and fuss, talking now of one thing, now of another. There was something very harrowing about the way the Doctor passed from one subject to another without logical connection, yet what disturbed the Collector even more was the fact that he so often returned to the same topic:...that of Dr McNab. Of course, he had always enjoyed making fun of McNab, retailing stories about drastic remedies for simple ailments and that sort of thing. Alas, the Doctor had become increasingly convinced that McNab was experimenting, was ignoring his medical training to follow fanciful notions of his own.

Dr Dunstaple had begun to talk about the patient beside whose bed, a soiled straw mattress on a *charpoy*, the Collector found himself standing; the man was a Eurasian of very pale skin and dark eyes which feverishly swept the room. He was suffering, explained the Doctor in a rapid, overbearing tone as if expecting the Collector to disagree with him, from severe laceration, the result of a shrapnel burst, of the soft parts of the right hand; the thumb was partially detached near the upper end of the metacarpal bone. Though the lips of the wound were retracted and gaping there was no haemorrhage and it seemed possible that the deep arteries had escaped injury...

"Was that unreasonable to suppose?" demanded the Doctor suddenly. The Collector, who had been listening uncomfortably to these explanations, shook his head, but only slightly, not wanting to give the impression

that he was passing judgement either one way or the other. At the same time he had become aware that another patient, an English private soldier who had escaped from Captainganj only to be wounded at Cutter's battery during the attack of the first of June, and who was strapped down to a *charpoy* near where the Padre was kneeling, had begun to sing, loudly and monotonously, as if to keep up his spirits. His song finished he immediately began it again, and so loudly as almost to drown the Doctor's vehement medical commentary:

"I'm ax'd for a song and 'mong soldiers 'tis plain,
I'd best sing a battle, a siege or campaign.
Of victories to choose from we Britons have store,
And need but go back to eight*een* fifty-four."

"A compress, dipped in cold water, placed on the palm after the edges of the wound had been evenly approximated and two or three interrupted sutures applied...then strapped, bandaged..."

"The Czar of all Russia, a potentate grand,
Would help the poor Sultan to manage his land;
But Britannia stept in, in her lady-like way,
To side with the weakest and fight for fair play."

"Stop that noise!" roared the Doctor. "Look here, Mr Hopkins, after twenty-four hours the integuments of the palm were flaccid and discoloured...Imagine how I felt! If you put any pressure on the wound a thin, sanious fluid with bubbles of gas escaped, causing considerable pain..."

"On Alma's steep banks, and on Inkerman's plain,
At famed Balaklava, the foe tried in vain
To wrest off the laurels that Britons long bore
But always got whopped in eight *een* fifty-four..."

"Then," said the Doctor, gripping the Collector's arm for he had stepped back, dizzy from the heat and smell, not to mention the noise (for, in addition to this desperate chanting there were groans and cries of men calling for attention), "the thumb was dark and cold and insensible. Another twelve hours and the dark hue of mortification had already spread over half the palm...the thumb and two fingers were already cold, livid and without sensation..."

"It's true at a distance they fought very well
With round shot and grape shot and rocket and shell
But when our lads closed and bayonets got play
They didn't quite like it and so...ran away!"

"The pulse was small and frequent, the smell from the mortifying parts was particularly offensive, Mr Hopkins. I now advised amputation of the forearm, close to the carpal end... *Silence!* I *had* thought that it would be enough to remove part of the hand only, but this was out of the question...Ah, this wasn't good enough for McNab! He said gangrene must follow...d'you hear? So forty-eight hours it was left wrapped in a linseed poultice. This was not my idea. I knew the whole hand must come off in the end and that there would be no gangrene of the stump...Here, sir, you can see for yourself the way the flaps are uniting in healthy granulations. D'you think that was McNab's linseed poultice? Had we waited a moment longer the man would have sunk completely!"

"No, no," broke in the Collector hurriedly. "Please don't undo the dressing. I shall see it when you're discharged fit," he added brightly to the patient who paid no attention to him whatsoever; the man's eyes continued to roam about feverishly.

The Doctor tried to detain him for further explanations but the Collector forced him aside, unable to spend another moment by this bedside. He strode to the nearest window and looked out, clumsily knocking over a pitcher of water as he did so. It emptied itself in slow gulps on to the earthen floor by his feet. Beyond the deep shadow in which the horses of the Sikh cavalry stamped and thrashed in a frenzy of irritation from the flies which attacked them, he thought he could perceive a splash of colour from the few surviving roses beneath the shade of the wickerwork screens. He gazed at them greedily.

Then Fleury came into view, carrying the bottles of mustard and looking excited. Seeing the Collector at the window he called: "Mrs Scott has been taken ill."

The Collector immediately put his finger to his lips and shook his head vigorously, pointing towards the next ward, to indicate that Fleury should inform McNab. Fleury, however, simply stopped in his tracks and stared at the Collector in astonishment, unable to comprehend why the most important personage in the garrison should suddenly resort to this baffling pantomine. He came closer and the Collector, concluding that Fleury was a dimwit (a conclusion supported, moreover, by his peculiar ideas on civilization) said in an undertone: "Tell Dr McNab. Dunstaple already has too much to do. He must be spared. Here, give me those."

And he took the bottles of mustard through the window, thinking: “What a time the poor mite has chosen to come into the world!”

The Doctor seemed surprised at first to be presented with the mustard and looked so irritated that the Collector wondered whether there had not been some mistake. But then the Doctor remembered, he had a case of cholera...it was almost certainly cholera, though sometimes when the men first reported sick it was hard to know from their symptoms whether they were suffering from cholera or from bilious remittent fever.

Cholera. The Collector could see Dr Dunstaple’s anger swelling, as if himself infected by the mere sound of the three syllables. And the Collector dreaded what was to come, for the subject of cholera invariably acted like a stimulant on the already overwrought Doctor. Cholera, evidently, had been the cause of the dispute between him and McNab which had brought about an unfortunate rift between the two doctors. Now he began, once again, to speak with a terrible eloquence about the iniquities of McNab’s “experimental” treatments and quackery cures. Suddenly, he seized the Collector’s wrist and dragged him across the ward to a mattress on which, pale as milk beneath a cloud of flies, a gaunt man lay shivering, stark naked.

“He’s now in the consecutive fever...How d’you think I cured this man? How d’you think I saved his life?”

The Collector offered no suggestions so the Doctor explained that he had used the best treatment known to medical science, the way he had been taught as a student, the treatment which, for want of a specific, every physician worthy of the name accorded his cholera patients...calomel, opium and poultices, together with brandy as a stimulant. Every half hour he gave pills of calomel (half a grain), opium and capsicum (of each one-eighth of a grain). Calomel, the Collector probably didn’t know, was an admirable aperient for cleansing the upper intestinal canal of the morbid cholera poison. At the same time, to relieve the cramps he had applied flannels wrung out of hot water and sprinkled with chloroform or turpentine to the feet, legs, stomach and chest, and even to the hands and arms. Then he had replaced them with flannels spread with mustard as his dispensers were now doing...At this point the Doctor tried to pull the Collector to yet another bed, where a Eurasian orderly was spreading mustard thickly with a knife on the chest and stomach of yet another tossing, groaning figure. But the Collector could stand no more and, shaking himself free, made for the door with the Doctor in pursuit.

The Doctor was grinning now and wanted to show the Collector a piece of paper. The Collector allowed himself to be halted as soon as he had inhaled a draught of fresh air. He stared in dismay at the unnaturally bright flush of the Doctor’s features, at the parody of good humour they wore, remembering many happier times when the good humour had been real.

“I copied it from the quack’s medical diary...With his permission, of course. He’s always making notes. No doubt he thinks he will make an impression with them. Read it. It concerns a cholera case...He wrote it, I believe, in Muttra about three years ago. Go on. Read it...” And he winked encouragingly at the Collector.

The Collector took the paper with reluctance and read:

> “She had almost no pulse. Body as cold as that of a corpse. Breath unbelievably cold, like that from the door of an ice-cavern. She has persistent cramps and vomits constantly a thin, gruel-like fluid without odour. Her face has taken on a terribly cadaverous aspect, sunken eyes, starting bones, worse than that of a corpse. Opening a vein it is hard to get any blood...what there is, is of a dark, treacly aspect..."

The Collector looked up, puzzled. “Why d’you show me this?”

“That was his wife!” cried the Doctor triumphantly. “Don’t you see, he takes notes all the time. Nothing will stop him...Even his wife! Nothing!”

Again, as the Collector put on his pith helmet and gave the brim a twitch, came the monotonous, desperate chanting he had heard before.

> “Now, now my brave boys, that the Russian is shamed
> Beat, bothered, and bowed down and peace is proclaimed,
> Let’s drink to our Queen, may she never want store,
> Of heroes like those of eight*een*fifty-four.”

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From the beginning of the siege the Union Jack had floated from the highest point of the Residency roof and had constantly drawn the fire of the sepoy sharpshooters. Passing into the shadow of the Residency on his way to Cutter’s battery, the Collector looked up and saw that the flag was once again in difficulties. The halyards had been severed and great splinters of wood had been struck off the shaft so that it looked as if a strong wind might well bring it down altogether. On one occasion, indeed, the staff had been completely shattered and a great cheer had gone up from the sepoys...but as soon as darkness permitted, another staff and new halyards had been erected in its place. The flag was crucial to the morale of the garrison; it reminded one that one was fighting for something more important than one’s own skin; that’s what it reminded the Collector of, anyway. And somewhere up there, too, in the most perilous position of all within the enclave, there was an officer crouching all day behind the low brick wall of the tower, watching the movements of the sepoys with a

telescope.

While the Collector's eyes had been lifted to the sky a loathsome creature had approached him along the ground; it was the hideous pariah dog, looking for Fleury. Since the Collector had last set eyes on the animal a ricocheting musket ball had taken off part of its rat-like tail, which now terminated in a repulsive running sore. The Collector launched a kick at it and it hopped away yelping.

As the Collector raised his eyes again for a last, inspirational glance at the flag before moving on, a dreadful smell of putrefaction was borne to his nostrils and he thought: "I must have something done about that tonight before we have an epidemic." This smell was no longer coming from the bodies of men and horses rotting outside the ramparts as it had done for the first few days; these, thank Heaven, had now been cleaned by the kites, vultures and jackals; it came from the dead horses and artillery bullocks that lay scattered over the Residency lawns and gardens, hit by the random shot and shells that unceasingly poured into the compound. But there was also a powerful and atrocious smell from behind the wall he had built to shield the croquet court, which lay between the Residency and Dunstaple's house. Here it was that Mr Rayne, aided by Eurasians from the opium agency, conducted the slaughter and butchery of the Commissariat sheep, commandeered at the outbreak of the mutiny from the Krishnapur Mutton Club on the Collector's instructions.

The smell, which was so atrocious that the butchers had to work with cloths tied over their noses, came from rejected offal which they were in the habit of throwing over the wall in the hope that the vultures would deal with it. But the truth was that the scavengers of the district, both birds and animals, were already thoroughly bloated from the results of the first attack...the birds were so heavy with meat that they could hardly launch themselves into the air, the jackals could hardly drag themselves back to their lairs. And so, out of the garrison's sight, but not out of range of their noses, a mountain of corruption had steadily built up. Combined with the animals scattered on the lawns, the smells from the hospital and from the privies, and from the human beings living in too close contact with insufficient water for frequent bathing, an olfactory background, silent but terrible, was unrolling itself behind the siege.

The back wall of Dr Dunstaple's house, which like the Residency was built of wafer-like red bricks, had been amazingly pocked by the shot which dashed against it; hardly a square foot of smooth surface remained now to be seen. In some places round shot had smashed through one wall after another so that if you had been unwise enough to raise your head to the appropriate angle you could have followed their passage through a series of rooms. After one such journey, the Collector had been told, a shot had finally burst through the wall into the Doctor's drawing-room on the other side of the building, scattering candlesticks and dropping them to roll along the carpet, right up to where Mrs Dunstaple and a group of disobedient ladies playing truant from the suffocating air of the cellar were cowering under the piano. From these larger holes in the wall Enfield rifles bristled and occasionally orange flowers blossomed from their muzzles; the wall in the room behind them had been painted black so that no movement could be seen against them.

From the house a shallow trench had been dug out towards the crescent of earthworks behind which the cannons had been placed. Here, too, there was a pit about fourteen feet deep with a ladder against the side, down which the Collector now stiffly climbed. Lieutenant Cutter was standing at the bottom with his finger to his lips.

"Are they mining?"

"Yes. We're digging a listening gallery." Cutter described in a whisper what was happening: at the head of the gallery a man sat and worked with a short-handled pick or crowbar to loosen the earth; just behind him sat another man with an empty wine case to fill up with the loose earth; when full, this was drawn back by a rope.

The sepoys here were very close and it was thought inevitable that sooner or later they would begin mining, given the number of men at their disposal. For several nights the Collector had stayed up until dawn reading his military manuals by the light of an oil-lamp in his study to instruct himself in the art of military mining; only Cutter of the officers, two Cornish privates from Captainganj, and one or two Sikhs, had had any experience of mining before. What an advantage that knowledge can be stored in books! The knowledge lies there like hermetically sealed provisions waiting for the day when you may need a meal. Surely what the Collector was doing as he pored over his military manuals, was proving the superiority of the European way of doing things, of European culture itself. This was a culture so flexible that whatever he needed was there in a book at his elbow. An ordinary sort of man, he could, with the help of an oil-lamp, turn himself into a great military engineer, a bishop, an explorer or a General overnight, if the fancy took him. As the Collector pored over his manuals, from time to time rubbing his tired eyes, he knew that he was using science and progress to help him out of his difficulties and he was pleased. The inventions on his desk, the carriage which supplied its own track and the effervescent drinking vessel, watched him in silent admiration as he worked.

The Collector had learned that there are two cardinal rules of defensive mining...One is that your branch galleries (whose purpose is for listening to the approaching enemy miners) should run *obliquely* forward in order not to present their sides to the action of enemy mines ...The other is that the distance between the ends of the branch galleries should be such that the enemy cannot burrow between them unheard (a distance which varies with the nature of the soil but which can be roughly taken as twenty yards).

The trouble with these cardinal rules, though wonderful in their way, was that they required a great deal of digging. No doubt they would have served perfectly if there had been enough men in the garrison to dig

listening galleries in the approved manner, reaching towards the enemy like the spread fingers of a hand. But Cutter lacked men. The best he and the Collector had been able to devise was a single lateral tunnel, slightly crescent-shaped to follow the contour of the ramparts, and which more resembled the hook of a man whose hand had been amputated.

The Collector, at the head of the gallery, strained his ears despondently for the scrape of the sepoy picks, but the only sound that came to them was the ghostly echo of a phrase of Vauban he had read: *Place assiégée, place prise!* For the Collector knew the truth of the matter: the sepoys did not even have to resort to mining. By using their artillery to make a breach in the defences and then digging a properly directed series of saps to approach it, they would be able to take the Residency in a matter of days. It was a commonplace of siege-craft that there was no way of countering such a methodical attack except by making sorties to harass the enemy and destroy his works...But where could he find the men to make sorties without hopelessly denuding the ramparts in several places?

Meanwhile Cutter, in a whisper, was explaining that he wanted to run an offensive gallery under the enemy lines and explode a mine of his own to breach their defences. With a sudden attack they might succeed in spiking or capturing the Sepoy cannons, in particular the eighteen-pounder which was slowly but surely reducing Dr Dunstaple's house to rubble. The Collector hesitated to agree to this...There was another difficulty: the shortage of powder. Anything less than, say, two hundred pounds of powder at a depth of twelve feet underground would be insufficient to make the required breach. Yet with two hundred pounds of powder you could fire a cannon a hundred times! And the slightest error of length or direction would mean that all this valuable powder would be thrown away fruitlessly.

"Very well," he said at length, "but make sure it does what it's supposed to."

Later, as he walked away, he recalled a work by another French military engineer, Cormontaingne, who had described in his imaginary *Journal of the Attack of a Fortress* the inevitable progress of a siege through its various stages up to the thirty-fifth day, ending with the words: "It is now time to surrender." That, at least, was one option not open to the Collector.

The Collector, conscious of himself gently floating in the blue prism of his daughters' telescope like a snake in a bottle of alcohol, now had to cross the most dangerous piece of ground within the enclave. He strode out firmly, pulling down the peak of his pith helmet and lowering his head as if walking into a blizzard. It was here on this lawn, green and well-watered during the magnificent Indian winter, that he had been host to many enjoyable garden parties. Over there, beneath that group of now shattered eucalyptus trees, had stood the band of one of the infantry regiments. Once he had looked out from the upper verandah of the Residency as the bandsmen were assembling; it was evening and somehow the deep scarlet of their uniforms against the dark green of the grass had stained his mind with a serious joy...so that even now, in spite of everything, those two colours, scarlet and dark green, still seemed to him the indelible colours of the rightness of the world, and of his place in it. Looking towards the river as he skirted a shell crater, across a parched brown desert dotted with festering animals, he had to make an effort of imagination to perceive that this was indeed the same place where he and his guests had sat drinking tea.

From his pocket the Collector produced the last of his clean, white handkerchiefs (soon he, too, would be in the power of the *dhobi* who had been terrorizing the ladies with his new prices) and held it to his nose while he considered a new and disagreeable problem. By now so many gentlemen had been killed that a large quantity of stores and other belongings had been collected. What he had to decide was whether to allow them to be auctioned, as they would have been in normal times, or to confiscate them for the good of the community. Ultimately, it seemed to him, the question boiled down to this: was it right that only those who had money to buy these provisions in the event of a famine should survive? The Magistrate was not the ideal person to ask for his view on such a matter. As the Collector had feared he had been unable to restrain his sarcasm.

"In the outside world people perish or survive depending on whether they have money, so why should they not here?"

"This is a different situation," the Collector had replied, scowling. "We must all help each other and depend on each other."

"And must we not outside?"

"People have more resources in normal times."

"Yet many perish even so, simply because they lack money."

The Collector's sigh was muffled by the handkerchief as he reached the fiercely humming rib-cage, head and flanks of a horse which had collapsed there with the saddle still strapped ludicrously to what was now only a rim of bones. Further on there was the carcase of a water buffalo, its eyes seething, its head and long neck looking as if they had literally been run into the ground. The Collector was fond of water buffaloes, which he found to have a friendly and apologetic air, but he could not think why there should have been one on his lawn.

By the time he had paid a visit to the banqueting hall the light was beginning to fade; on his way back, the

Collector removed his pith helmet to air his scalp. It was his belief, based as yet on no scientific evidence, that lack of air to the scalp caused premature baldness; for this reason he had taken a particular interest in the hat shown at the Great Exhibition which had had a special ventilation valve in the crown; moreover, when the present troubles had started he had been considering the most delicate and interesting experiment to evaluate this suspicion and which would have involved hiring natives in large numbers to keep their heads covered and submit to certain statistical investigations.

At the thought of statistics, the Collector, walking through the chaotic Residency garden, felt his heart quicken with joy...For what were statistics but the ordering of a chaotic universe? Statistics were the leg-irons to be clapped on the *thugs* of ignorance and superstition which strangled Truth in lonely byways. Nothing was able to resist statistics, not even Death itself, for the Collector, armed with statistics, could pick up Death, sniff it, dissect it, pour acid on it, or see if it was soluble. The Collector knew, for example, that in London during the second quarter of 1855 among 3,870 men of the age of 20 and upwards who had succumbed, there had been 2 peers of the realm, 82 civil servants, 25 policemen, 209 officers, soldiers and pensioners, 103 members of the learned professions including 9 clergymen, 4 barristers, 23 solicitors, 3 physicians, 12 surgeons, 43 men of letters, men of science or artists, and twelve eating- and coffee-house keepers...and so much more the Collector knew. He knew that out of 20,257 tailors 108 had passed to a better world; that 139 shoemakers had gone to their reward out of 26,639...and that was still only a fraction of what the Collector could have told you about Death. If mankind was ever to climb up out of its present uncertainties, disputations and self-doubtings, it would only be on such a ladder of objective facts.

Suddenly, a shadow swooped at him out of a thin grove of peepul trees he was passing through. He raised a hand to defend himself as something tried to claw and bite him, then swooped away again. In the twilight he saw two green pebbles gazing down at him from beneath a sailor cap. It was the pet monkey he had seen before in the shadow of the Church; the animal had managed to bite and tear itself free of its jacket but the sailor hat had defied all its efforts. Again and again, in a frenzy of irritation it had clutched at that hat on which was written *HMS John Company*...but it had remained in place. The string beneath its jaw was too strong.

Near the trees the Collector could see some dogs slumbering beside a well used by gardeners in normal times for the complicated system of irrigation which brought water to the Residency flower beds. He could recognize certain of these dogs from having seen them in the station bobbery pack on their way to hunt jackals with noisy, carefree young officers; they included mongrels and terriers of many shapes and sizes but also dogs of purer breed...setters and spaniels, among them Chloë, and even one or two lap-dogs. What a sad spectacle they made! The faithful creatures were daily sinking into a more desperate state. While jackals and pariah dogs grew fat, they grew thin; their soft and luxurious upbringing had not fitted them for this harsh reality. If they dared approach the carcase of a horse or bullock, or the fuming mountain of offal beside the croquet wall, orange eyes, bristling hair and snapping teeth would drive them away.

It was dark by the time the Collector's tour was over and the night was brilliantly starlit. Tonight, as always, in the darkness around the enclave he could see bonfires burning. Were they signals? Nobody knew. But every night they reappeared. Other, more distant bonfires could be seen from the roof, burning mysteriously by themselves out there on the empty plain where in normal times there was nothing but darkness.

During the daytime it had become the custom for a vast crowd of onlookers to assemble on the hill-slope above the melon beds to witness the destruction of the Residency. They came from all over the district, as to a fair or festival; there was music and dancing; beyond the noise of the guns the garrison could hear the incessant sighing of native instruments, of flutes and sitars accompanied by finger-drums; there were merchants and vendors of food and drink, nuts, sherbets and sugarcane...sometimes a caprice of the wind would torment the garrison with a spicy smell of cooking chicken as a relief from the relentless smell of putrefaction (at intervals the Collector would stop and curse himself for having so ignorantly ordered the offal to be jettisoned to windward); in addition there were the *ryots* from the indigo plantations and those from the opium fields in bullock-carts or on foot, there were the peasants from the villages, the travelling holy men, the cargoes of veiled Mohammedan women, the crowds from the Krishnapur bazaars and even one or two elephants carrying local zemindars, surrounded like Renaissance princes with liveried retainers. This cheerful and multifarious crowd assembled every day beneath awnings, tents and umbrellas to watch the *feringhees* fighting for their lives. At first the Collector had found this crowd of spectators a bitter humiliation, but now he seldom gave it a thought. He had issued orders that no powder was to be wasted on dispersing them, even though they were well within range.

The Collector still had one more call to make; this was to a shed with open, barred windows which formed the very last of the long row of stables, now converted into the hospital. It was here, in the days when life in Krishnapur had been on a grander scale, that a former Resident, anxious to emulate the local rajahs, had kept a pair of tigers. Now, where once the tigers had lived, Hari strode endlessly back and forth behind the bars, while the Prime Minister, sitting on a pile of straw, followed his movements with expressionless eyes.

Hari had been moved here "for the good of the community", causing the Collector another severe inflammation of conscience. It had been noticed that the one part of the enclave which the sepoys had been careful to avoid hitting with their cannons was precisely the spot where Hari was quartered. Word of his

whereabouts had no doubt filtered out to the sepoy lines by way of the native servants who continued to defect one by one as the plight of the garrison became more desperate. Once this unfortunate discovery had been made, the Collector found himself morally obliged (it was his duty) to make use of it. So Hari had been turned out of the relative comfort and safety of the Residency and lodged in the tiger house which conveniently happened to be adjacent to the hospital.

Hari had not taken well to this change. Watching him as the days went by, the guilty Collector had noticed signs of physical and moral decline. His fat cheeks, always pale, had taken on a greyish tinge. He had complained, first that he could not eat, then that the food he was given was not fit for a human being...It was true that the food was not very good, but what could one expect during a siege? And food was not the only trouble. Always inclined to petulance, Hari had now taken on a permanent look of discontent.

"You should go outside, visit people, talk with them, perhaps even do a spot of fighting," the Collector had counselled him, increasingly disturbed by the change which was taking place in Hari's character. Hari had been so full of enthusiasm, so interested in every new and progressive idea. And now he was so listless!

"You give permission to going outside camp, perhaps?"

"Well, no, not outside the ramparts, of course."

"Ha!"

"But you must occupy yourself. You can't remain here in this room for ever. Who knows how long the siege will go on?"

"Correct! You keep me prisoner but you pretend to yourself that you do not keeping prisoner myself and Prime Minister. You want me to kill for British perhaps my own little brothers and sisters who plead with me for lives, raising little hands very piteously? I will not do it, Mr Hopkin, I will rather die than do it, I can assure you. It is no good. You torture me first. I still not killing little brother and sister."

"Oh, I say, look here...no one is asking you to kill your brother and sister. You mustn't exaggerate."

"Yes, you asking me to killing brother and sister and you asking Prime Minister to sticking with bayonet his very old widow mother lady!"

"Oh, what rubbish!"

"Oh, what rubbish, you say, but I knowing very different. All is not well that end well if I killing little babies for Queen, I assure you. I die rather than do that. Prime Minister also, to my way of thinking!"

The Prime Minister, sitting on his heap of straw, his eyes as expressionless as ever, had shown no sign of being partial either to killing babies or not killing them, or to anything whatsoever.

"If only the poor lad could have brought someone a bit more stimulating as a companion," the Collector had thought miserably. "He's pining away for lack of something to occupy his mind."

Once again the Collector had to take out his handkerchief and hold it to his nose, this time because he was passing the open doors and windows of the hospital. He could not shut his ears, though, to the cries and groans; he even believed he could hear the monotonous chanting of the Crimean veteran as he hurried by, but he already had enough to think about with Hari. As he approached the tiger house he braced himself for the inevitable reproaches. But today, for some reason, Hari's interest in the world seemed to have revived.

As usual he was striding up and down behind the bars while the Prime Minister sat passively on his heap of straw. There was a significant change, however. Hari was looking excited, indeed feverishly so...but something else had changed, too, and for a while the Collector could not think what it was. Then it came to him: the Prime Minister's head was bare. It was not simply that he had removed his French military cap, he had removed his hair as well. His skull was shaved and oiled, and it gleamed in the lamplight. For some reason it was covered by a hair net with a large mesh.

The Collector assumed that this shaving of the Prime Minister's skull had some religious significance; he knew that Hindus are always shaving their heads for one reason or another; but then he noticed that Hari's eyes kept returning to the gleaming cranium as to a work of art. Looking a little closer, he noticed that what he had taken for the strings of a net were, in fact, ritual lines drawn in ink on the Prime Minister's scalp.

"I become devotee of Frenloudji!" exclaimed Hari.

"Frenloudji?"

"Frenla-ji! Correct? Science of head!"

"Oh, phren *ol* ogy! I see what you mean!"

"Correct! Let me explain you about phrenology...Most interesting science and exceedingly useful for getting the measure of your man...I have got measure of Prime Minister without least difficulties. You see, head is furnished with vast apparatus of mental organ and each organs extend from the gentleman's medulla oblongata, or top of spinal marrow, to surface of brain or cerebellum. Every gentleman possess all organ to greater or lesser degree. Let us say, he possess big organ of Wit, if he say very amusing things then organ of Wit is very big and powerful and we see large bump on right and left of forehead here..." and Hari pointed to a spot somewhat above each of the Prime Minister's eyebrows.

"This organ is very big in Mr F. Rabelais and Mr J. Swift. In Prime Minister not so big. In you, Mr Hopkin, not so big. In me, not so big." The Prime Minister fingered his sacred thread but offered no comment.

"The man who discovered this science, Dr Gall of Vienna, remove many skulls from people he had known in life. He found brain which is covered by dura mater..." (Hari pronounced this with relief, as if it were the name of an Indian dish) "has same shape as skull having during life. So that's why we see bump or no bump

on Prime Minister's head."

"I see," said the Collector, who felt that his understanding of phrenology might be vulnerable to any further explanations from Hari.

"There are certain parts at base of brain, in middle and posterior regions, size of which cannot be discover during life and whose function therefore remain unknown. But some bumps we seen even though in difficult position. You see, for example... *Amativeness*..." Hari snatched up a book lent him by the Magistrate, and read: "Amativeness. The cerebellum is the organ of this propensity, and it is situated between the mastoid processes on each side...and so on and so forth...The size is indicated during life by the thickness of the neck at these parts. The faculty gives rise to the sexual feeling. In newborn children the cerebellum is the least developed of all the cerebral parts. It is to the brain as one to twenty and in adults as one to six. The organ attains its full size from the age of eighteen to twenty-six. It is less in females, in general, than in males. In old age it frequently diminishes."

Hari put the book down and beckoned the Collector to come and examine the Prime Minister.

"Amativeness is not very powerful organ in Prime Minister. In me, very powerful. In Father it is fearfully, fearfully powerful so that all other organ wither away, I'm thinking..." Hari laughed heartily and then suddenly clutched his organ of Wit.

"Well, I must be on my way, Hari," said the Collector sadly. How distressed he felt to see this young man's open mind tainted by the Magistrate! But before Hari allowed him to leave he insisted on staring indiscreetly for a long time at the back of the Collector's neck and even prodding it with a muttered, "Excuse liberty, please." His only verdict, however, was a cough and modestly lowered eyes.

As he was returning to the Residency he thought he heard a voice calling from the far side of the hospital, beyond the churchyard wall. He went to investigate and saw the faint silhouette of the Padre, digging wearily with a spade and muttering to himself as he worked. Beside the path the Collector dimly perceived three long forms sewn up in bedding.

"Padre, is there no one to help you?"

But the Padre made no reply, perhaps had not even heard. He went on digging and muttering to himself. The Collector could just hear his words: "...Man that is born of woman hath but a short time to live. He cometh up, and is cut down, like a flower; he fleeth as it were a shadow, and never continueth in one stay..."

The Collector spoke to him again, but still the Padre paid no attention. So in the end the Collector took the spade himself and made the Padre lie down on the path beside the corpses.

Then, for an hour or more the Collector dug steadily by himself. At first he thought: "This is easy. The working classes make a lot of fuss about nothing." But he had never used a spade in his life before and soon his hands became blistered and painful. He was invaded by a great sadness, then. The sadness emanated from the three silent figures sewn up in bedding and he thought again of his death statistics, but was not comforted...And as he dug, he wept. He saw Hari's animated face, and numberless dead men, and the hatred on the faces of the sepoys...and it suddenly seemed to him that he could see clearly the basis of all conflict and misery, something mysterious which grows in men at the same time as hair and teeth and brains and which reveals its presence by the utter and atrocious inflexibility of all human habits and beliefs, even including his own. Presently, he heard the Padre's voice whispering over the bodies in the darkness: "They shall hunger no more, neither thirst any more; neither shall the sun light on them, nor any heat. For the Lamb which is in the midst of the throne shall feed them, and shall lead them unto living fountains of waters: and God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes." When the Collector had finished digging two of the graves he helped the Padre carry the bodies over and bury them, and then set to work on the third grave. By the time a fatigue party came out of the darkness to relieve him he had composed himself again, which was just as well in the circumstances, for no garrison is encouraged by the sight of its commander in tears.

Now at last the Collector's long day was over. A lamp was burning in his study and in the glass of the bookcases he saw his own image, shadowy in detail, wearing an already rather tattered morning coat, the face also in shadow, anonymous, the face of a man like other men, who in a few years would be lost to history, whose personality would be no more individual than this shadowy reflection in the glass. "How alike we all are, really...There's so little difference between one man and another when one comes to think of it."

As he moved to turn out the lamp before going upstairs he thought how normal everything still was here. It might have been any evening of the years he had spent in Krishnapur. Only his ragged coat, his boots soiled from digging graves, his poorly trimmed whiskers, and his exhausted appearance would have given one to suspect that there was anything amiss. That and the sound of gunfire from the compound.

On his way upstairs he passed Miriam in the hall and without particularly meaning to he put his arm around her. She was on her hands and knees when this happened, searching the floor with a candle for some pearls she had dropped when the string she was wearing had broken; in spite of their increasingly ragged appearance it had become the habit for the ladies to wear all the jewellery they possessed for safe-keeping. They should have been quite easy to find but some had rolled away into the forest of dusty, carved legs of tables and chairs which here comprised the lumber of "possessions". When the Collector touched her she did

not faint or seem offended; she returned the pressure quite firmly and then sat back on her heels, brushing a lock of hair out of her eyes with her knuckles because her hands were dirty. She looked at him for a long time but did not say anything. After a while she went on looking for her pearls and he went on his way upstairs. He did not know what had made him do that. It had been discouragement more than anything. At that moment he had been feeling the need for some kind of comfort...perhaps any kind would have done...a good bottle of claret, for example, instead. Still, Mrs Lang was a sensible woman and he did not think she would mind. "Funny creatures, women, all the same," he mused. "One never knows quite what goes on in their minds."

Later, while he was drinking tea at the table in his bedroom with three young subalterns from Captainganj a succession of musket balls came through the window, attracted by the oillamp...one, two, three, and then a fourth, one after another. The officers dived smartly under the table, leaving the Collector to drink his tea alone. After a while they re-emerged smiling sheepishly, deeply impressed by the Collector's sangfroid. Realizing that he had forgotten to sweeten his tea, the Collector dipped a teaspoon into the sugar-bowl. But then he found that he was unable to keep the sugar on the spoon: as quickly as he scooped it up, it danced off again. It was clear that he would never get it from the sugar-bowl to his cup without scattering it over the table, so in the end he was obliged to push the sugar away and drink his tea unsweetened. Luckily, none of the officers had noticed.

That night, as soon as he closed his eyes the bed on which he lay began to spin round and round; within a few seconds, it seemed, he had been drawn down into a sleep where shattering events raged back and forth over his unconscious mind. Gradually, however, they receded and he fell into a more calm, profound sleep...but not so profound that he could not hear, though at a great distance, the heart-rending screams of Mrs Scott giving birth a few rooms away on the next floor. Once, he suddenly started up in bed, thinking: "The poor mite! What a world to be born into!" but perhaps that was merely part of a long, sad, ineffably sad dream he had before dawn.

But as it turned out, the baby was not born alive and Mrs Scott herself, in spite of everything that was done to save her, sank rapidly and died before morning. In the first light Dr McNab, who had not slept at all, sat at a table by the window in the room where Mrs Scott had died (which formed part of the flagstaff tower), writing in his notebook the brief details of what had happened. He wrote: "Caesarean section. Felt head of child, which had come low down, suddenly recede; symptoms of ruptured uterus followed...The foetus could easily be felt through the abdominal walls and was apparently quite loose, while it could not be reached by the vagina; it was evident that the uterus had given way. The patient not yet in a very collapsed state, but declining rapidly. Proceeded to remove the foetus by gastrotomy...an incision about six inches in breadth was made in the median line between the umbilicus and pubes; the foetus was easily reached and, as expected was found loose in the peritoneal cavity; it was removed (dead) together with the whole of the cord and the placenta; not much haemorrhage occurred, nor was much blood found in the abdomen. Stimulants, opiates etc. were liberally employed afterwards, but in spite of them the woman sank, and died in about three hours..."

Dr McNab paused for a moment in his writing and turned round in his chair to stare at the bed, which was now empty for Mrs Scott, sewn in her bedding, had been carried to the Church where she would lie until darkness came and it was safe to bury her. He frowned thoughtfully, as if trying to concentrate, then he went on writing.

In this room where throughout the night the most terrible shrieks of pain had echoed, there was now no sound to break the silence except the scratching of Dr McNab's pen-nib as he wrote and an occasional clink of china as he dipped it into the inkwell. Outside, the gunfire continued steadily.

15

It had been planned that on Tuesday, 7 July, Cutter should spring his mine beneath the sepoy positions; Harry and Fleury had been selected to join the sortie that was to coincide with this event. Tuesday also happened to be Fleury's birthday, and he was sentimental about birthdays, particularly his own; at the same time he affected to regard them as events of no importance.

Your sister, as a rule, can be relied on to remember when your birthday is; but when on the Monday evening Miriam and several other ladies and gentlemen gathered on the Residency verandah to sing hymns before retiring to bed Fleury could see no sign of awareness on his sister's face that an unusual event was soon to occur. She sang away unconcernedly, with great feeling: "O God our help in ages past..." She had a beautiful voice and normally Fleury loved to hear her singing; but this evening he suspected that she was putting it on for the Collector's benefit. The Collector, although not singing himself (for he had no voice), was leaning against the louvred wooden shutters in the semi-darkness, listening. Many members of the garrison were becoming a little perturbed about the Collector. His face had taken on a more haggard look and he was sometimes heard to be muttering to himself...once or twice he had even been heard laughing to himself as he walked about; it was an uncomfortable laugh, and if he saw you looking at him he would stop immediately; his face would become stern and expressionless once more inside its cat-like ruff of whiskers. There was no reason to make too much of this, however...a man has to be allowed a few personal idiosyncrasies, after all,

and the Collector had done a splendid job so far. All the same, the Collector was in complete command of the garrison and everything that happened in the enclave happened at his behest. The siege, in a manner of speaking, was *his idea*. It would be unfortunate, to put it mildly, if now or at some later stage he should collapse when so much depended on him. So no wonder that people had begun to watch him rather uneasily. Mind you, he was probably still as sound as a bell. And it could hardly be a bad thing that he had come to listen to the singing of hymns. It was a pity that his face could not be seen more clearly in the shadows.

Miriam stood in the light of the lamp. Her face had grown pink, her eyes shone, and her breast heaved. She had never sung so thrillingly before.

"Yes," thought Fleury, "she's going at it hammer and tongs for *his* benefit!" Full of self-pity he made his way back to his lonely *charpoy* in the banqueting-hall.

The following morning he and Harry waited tensely with their horses in the shelter of Dr Dunstaple's house for the signal that Cutter was ready to spring his mine. The sortie was to be led by Lieutenant Peterson. A number of other gentlemen were also there, including Mr Ronald Rose, one of the railway engineers, Mr Simmons, the skin of whose face had now been totally flayed by the sun, and the Schleissner brothers, Claude and Michael, both ensigns from Captainganj.

"I say, I've just remembered, it's my birthday today," Fleury remarked casually to Harry, and then scowled at his blunder; he had not meant to tell anyone, then he had blurted it out.

"Many happy returns," said Harry, rather absentmindedly. He would have shown more interest but in a few moments, whirling his sabre, he would be riding for the enemy lines. Beside this crimson thought Fleury's birthday seemed anaemic.

Fleury clenched his teeth morosely, thinking: "Cutter is taking a devilish long time with his mine."

As a matter of fact, Fleury had something else on his mind besides his birthday. Recently he had been employing his idle hours (for a siege can be very dull to a man of culture) in a deep and thorough investigation of the military arts. Like the Collector he believed that nothing need be outside the scope of the man of intelligence. And so he had made a rapid, sceptical reading of the Collector's authorities, Vauban and so forth, groaning derisively to Harry over their lack of imagination, errors of logic, and sluggish mental processes. The only idea which had caused him any enthusiasm he had found in Carnot, who had attempted to prove mathematically that by using a thirteen-inch mortar to discharge six hundred iron balls at a time any besieging force could be rapidly wiped out.

For three or four days he had pestered the Collector with offers of advice, but then his enthusiasm for Carnot's idea had lapsed in favour of one of his own. This was a design for a new weapon which would, he believed, create a revolution in the cavalry charge. Now, the great difficulty in the cavalry charge, as Fleury saw it, is that you very often have to deal with two of the enemy at once, with the result that while you are cutting the head off one of your assailants his companion is doing the same for you. The weapon which Fleury had designed and made for himself in order to overcome this difficulty resembled a giant pitchfork with prongs roughly at a distance of a man's outstretched arms; it also had a wide tail, like that of a magnified bishop's crozier which, reversed, could be used for dragging people off horses; on the shaft, for psychological reasons, there fluttered a small Union Jack. His only problem was to find a place to attach the weapon to his saddle. For the time being the prongs of the instrument (which he had christened the Fleury Cavalry Eradicator) sprouted over his horse's head like a pair of weird antlers. Well, would it work or not? He would soon find out. Meanwhile, what on earth was Cutter up to?

The Collector, too, was waiting impatiently. So much depended on the success of this operation. He had been standing in the pit beside the battery for the past few minutes, since Cutter had disappeared along the shaft; at the Collector's side two Sikhs were working a primitive bellows attached to improvised pipes of canvas, pumping air to the head of the shaft. Up there somewhere, at a place which he estimated would be directly beneath the enemy position, Cutter had picked a small chamber in the side of the gallery wall in which to stow the charge, the intention being to increase the force of the explosion by keeping it out of the direct line of the gallery. Boxes of powder had been dragged up to him. He had stowed them and set the fuse of powder-hose; now he was tamping, that is to say, filling up the head of the gallery to prevent the charge blowing back down it; this, too, had to be done with care for if he disturbed the fuse and it failed to function the tamping would have to be unpicked again, a dangerous business; to add to the difficulty he had to work in complete darkness without so much as a candle, for fear of the powder exploding too soon.

At last Cutter crawled out of the gallery; he looked exhausted and in need of fresh air. He was ready now to spring the mine, was the attacking force ready? Yes. He lit a candle and ducked back into the gallery; in order to save powder he had not brought the fuse right back to the shaft; this powder-hose fuse had been extemporized from a tube of linen sewn by the ladies; it was immensely long and about an inch in diameter, and had provided the ladies with a task which had occupied their fingers for many hours; filled with powder it would burn at ten to twenty feet a second, so Cutter had no time to loiter in the gallery after he had touched it off.

The Collector raised his hand to give the signal for cannons and rifles to fire as Cutter touched off the fuse and sprinted back down the gallery. A storm of gunfire broke out. Cutter just reached the shaft in time to see the cavalry squadron (accompanied by Fleury on what looked like a reindeer) springing over the rampart and spurring for the enemy lines; then there was a great explosion and he was pelted with earth and pebbles from

the mouth of the gallery.

To Fleury it seemed that the yellow earth was erupting before him scattering dark objects which might have been sepoys. It was as yet impossible to see in the dust cloud whether the enemy defences had been breached. Ahead of him Lieutenant Peterson flourished his sabre shouting soundlessly and then held it out stiff and straight in front of him over his horse's straining head. He vanished into the curtain of yellow dust followed by two Sikhs, then by Harry, then by the rest of the squadron including Fleury himself. In the yellow fog sepoys were wandering stunned and defenceless; everywhere the riders cut them down. In front of Fleury two *sowars* hesitated, uncertain whether to spur forward and do battle or to turn tail; behind him Mr Rose lifted his sabre to split the skull of a staggering infantryman. The two *sowars* continued to vacillate in front of Fleury; he unshipped the Cavalry Eradicator. His victims were ideally positioned, he would never have a better chance! Uttering a peculiar but scientific warcry (he had calculated that maximum discouragement to the enemy would be caused by a mixture of gutturals and sibilants) he drove forward with all his might.

The *sowars* each stared in amazement at the wicked, glistening point heading straight for his heart; they exchanged a glance of despair...but by a miracle the two steel prongs came to a trembling halt an inch from their hearts. They looked along the shaft to where Fleury, his eyes bulging, his face red with exertion, tried to drive the points those extra inches which would put them to death. Then, by a common accord, they turned their horses and bolted. Behind Fleury, Mr Rose, his brawny arms just beginning the downward swing that would split the sepoy's skull, had found himself suddenly whisked out of his saddle and was now struggling like a gaffed salmon on the end of the Eradicator. By the time he had freed himself, cursing, his victim also had vanished. Indeed, all the sepoys had vanished by now or were lying dead or mortally wounded.

"Come on! The guns!"

Throwing down the Eradicator (which he now realized had certain flaws of design) Fleury followed Harry through the choking yellow fog. Lieutenant Peterson was already labouring with two Sikhs to limber up a six-pounder to bring back to their lines; Mr Ford and an indigo planter were working to silence the dreaded eighteen-pounder.

"Spike the twelve-pounder!" shouted Harry and handed Fleury a six-inch nail. Fleury took the nail but shouted back: "Alright but where's the spike?"

"The nail, you fool! Hammer it into the vent and then break it off."

Nobody likes to be called a fool...even less a person of Fleury's intelligence...Least of all, a person of Fleury's intelligence by a person of Harry's. And how was Fleury to know that spiking guns did not mean what it said (and what any normally intelligent person would have thought it meant: namely, hammering a large spike into the muzzle) but something quite different? Decidedly, Harry was letting his military training go to his head, but he had already hurried away to hammer nails into other guns, so Fleury, too, set to work and made rather a good job, he thought, of spiking the twelve-pounder.

The six-pounder and a howitzer were dragged away by Sikhs towards the Residency ramparts. Lieutenant Peterson shouted the order to retreat; the yellow fog had now cleared to a light, sparkling mist and the sepoys were re-grouping to launch a counter-attack. Now only Lieutenant Peterson himself lingered. He had found one of the sepoy ammunition stores, had quickly scattered a train of powder to it, and was now attempting to fire it. At last, he succeeded, swung himself into the saddle and was away. His horse cleared the sepoy rampart and sped like an arrow after his men across the open ground. Suddenly they saw him hit. He slid out of the saddle and bounced in the dust. Without hesitation both Harry and Fleury turned their horses and spurred back to where he lay. Fleury rode on to catch the reins of the Lieutenant's horse while Harry tried to lift him from the ground. Then together they struggled to get him into the saddle, but again he was hit. They felt his body shudder as another ball struck him in the back and they were obliged to give up the attempt. At this moment there was a great flash and an explosion rang around the plain. Harry and Fleury knelt beside Peterson and shook hands with him for the last time, and as they did so the pallor of death came over his face. Fleury struggled for a moment to remove the locket from around his neck to bring back to his wife, but it was too securely fastened. Then they were both in the saddle once more and riding for the safety of the Residency rampart. They sailed over it at last, accompanied by a volley of musket balls.

16

In spite of his difficulties with the Eradicator Fleury came very well out of this attack. He and Harry had both behaved with great bravery in full view of everyone. The ladies in the billiard room, who had been reciting the litany throughout the attack, were chattering with excitement and could talk of little else. Perhaps, if one takes the long view, this gallant action might be seen as a solstice in Fleury's life, for from now on as the days went by he grew steadily less responsive to beauty and steadily more bluff, good-natured and interested in physical things. So pleased was he, so busily engaged in modest assurances that anyone would have done the same in his place, that when at dusk he paid his usual evening visit to the Residency and found Miriam, Louise, Harry and Lucy (whom they had felt sorry for) waiting to lead him to a special celebration, his birthday had gone completely out of his mind. And it was a splendid affair, for Lucy, who was good at that sort of thing, had succeeded in begging a cup of sugar from one of the gentlemen working at the

Commissariat...and this sugar, which none of them had tasted for days, made them as festive as if it had been champagne. They had saved some flour and some suet, too, and Miriam had bought a bottle of port wine from someone, and so they had made something which was not exactly a birthday cake, but more a birthday pudding, with "Happy Birthday, Dobbin!" written on top in pieces of broken sugar biscuit (Fleury's brow darkened for a moment at "Dobbin" but evidently Miriam had forgotten) and the whole thing thoroughly soaked in port wine. Of course, the rest of the port wine they drank to Fleury's health. As for Fleury, his eyes kept hurrying back to Louise to see if she were as happy as he was. How lovely she looked, and how gentle!

Louise was as happy as he was, almost. The only thing that slightly diminished her pleasure was the knowledge that she had an unsightly red spot on her forehead and another one, perhaps even a boil, coming up on her neck. In addition, she had been out in the sun without her bonnet, which she had given to a wounded Sikh, and her face had a much pinker look than she considered becoming.

But she was glad that the pudding was a success. It was she who had had to make it because Miriam had turned out to be hopelessly impractical when it had come to the point, the way capable, intelligent people often are when it comes to cooking and making things. And she was glad, too, that Fleury had turned out not to be a coward...of course, she had not expected that he *would*, but all the same, you could never tell and Fleury in some ways was so unusual...He had such interesting ideas, for one thing, and he knew everything. She could not think of anything he did not know and it was even a bit embarrassing to see how much more he knew than even the Padre, or the Magistrate, or her father, or even than the Collector. She sometimes thought him a little tactless and that he should sometimes pretend to be a bit more stupid so as not to make older people feel inferior. Perhaps that was why she had not liked him so much at first, and had thought him conceited. But now she thought him wonderful, and so personable, even though one had to admit that he smelled rather strong...but then they all did; it was so hard to keep yourself clean without the bearers to help. She herself had begun to smell rather disagreeable. She regretted this but without soap all her efforts to render herself odourless had proved vain...her only comfort was that she smelled less than many of the other ladies of her own class and, of course, than *all* those of the classes beneath her. It was the view of the billiard room that the artillery women could no longer be approached. But she was worried about that spot on her forehead and afraid that Fleury might start seeing her as she really was, and so she kept raising her hand to her forehead, as if in thought.

There was, however, a greater anxiety in Louise's life than either her smell or her spots. She was concerned for her father, Dr Dunstaple. As the days went by he became more and more liable to fits of rage. Nowadays he could hardly open his mouth without abusing Dr McNab, whom he had taken to calling "the Gravedigger". Louise had remonstrated with him but the Doctor was not in the habit of allowing his children to advise him on his conduct, least of all his daughters. He had flown into a rage, insinuating that she was "in league" with McNab. The Doctor had his fit of rage in his own drawing-room, in full hearing of the ladies cowering in the cellar below (as much in fear of his wrath as of the round shot which were slowly knocking the house to pieces around them). Mrs Dunstaple cowered there, too. She had never been able to do anything with her husband when he was angry, never, she sobbed.

So poor Louise, who loved her father very dearly, could only turn to Harry for help. But Harry listened to her in frank disbelief. Girls had a habit, he knew, of distressing themselves over things which did not exist. It was something to do with their wombs, so a fellow-officer had once told him. No doubt Louise was suffering from this womb-anxiety, then. He explained that if Father had started calling McNab "the Grave-digger" it was only from a robust sense of professional rivalry and nothing to worry about. Besides, McNab probably deserved it from all one heard.

Louise longed to confide in someone; above all, she longed to confide in Fleury; he would at least take her seriously; he would show concern. The trouble was that he would almost certainly be unable to refrain from some ill-advised action, such as taking her father's arm as if they were equals and giving him a condescending lecture. That was unthinkable. She must conceal her worries from Fleury.

In the end it was to Miriam that she had told them, thinking: "Miriam is mature and sensible. She'll know what to do." And so she had approached Miriam, though diffidently because one has a natural reluctance to discuss family matters with those outside the family. Miriam had given her a sensible opinion to the effect that the obvious person to ask for advice was a doctor, hence Dr McNab himself! Who could be better? Louise had had misgivings about this at first. But it was certain that her father needed a doctor's attention and that Dr McNab, who had suffered all his colleague's slanders without a murmur, deserved an apology.

Dr McNab, his eyebrows raised considerately, had listened to what Louise had to say. "Aye, you must get him to rest, Miss Dunstaple. The poor man is overworked."

"But how?"

"I wish I could tell you but I cannot. He'll not take advice from me." Then, seeing Louise's distress, he added: "But perhaps we shall think of a way."

Louise's grief and anxiety did not prevent her noticing that, in common with certain of the other gentlemen, Dr McNab appeared to show an interest in Miriam. He treated her with a decorous gallantry, as if her presence beside him in a patched and mended dress of grey cotton, stockingless, hands rough from washing her own clothes and hair full of dust, had been that of a lady in the most elegant drawing-room. When his eyes rested on her face an expression of good humour and sympathy replaced his habitually sad and grave

demeanour. Louise had often noticed how thrilling it is to see a smile on the face of someone who does not often smile, particularly someone as grave as Dr McNab. She could not help saying to Miriam after this interview: “I think you have made another conquest among the gentlemen.”

“Oh, surely not,” said Miriam, laughing. “I don’t think I have made a single one. Besides, I have often noticed that the gentlemen only have eyes for you, my dear, and although men are not usually the most intelligent of creatures, this time for once they are right, because you are the prettiest girl in India. I can assure you that if I wanted to make conquests I should take care not to appear in your company.”

“You only say that because you’re kind, but you know that it really isn’t true. What gentleman in the world would not prefer your company to that of an empty-headed creature like me?”

“You must ask my brother that question,” said Miriam smiling and taking Louise’s arm to put an end to this unctuous exchange. “Let me tell you a secret. We shall both find, if we survive this dreadful siege, gentlemen who think each of us uniquely wonderful and who would not give a farthing for the other. Why? Who knows why? Because that’s the way of the world, that’s why.” And with this comment, which was further proof to Louise of Miriam’s superiority and good sense, the subject had been closed.

Now, although she was glad that the birthday pudding was a success, Louise found herself with yet another cause for family distress: the attention that Harry was paying to Lucy. Anyone who knew him less well than his sister might not have noticed how his manner had changed. How gruff he had become, how paternal, how full of authority!

“You’d better sit here, Lucy, where you can serve out the pudding and see that that young beggar Fleury doesn’t get too much, ha ha, even though it is his birthday.” And Harry had indicated a place on the floor beside himself. The party, as it happened, was taking place on the carpet of the Residency drawing-room, in the lee of a shattered grand piano; additional protection to their flanks was offered by the gorse bruiser which had been moved from the dining-room, a marble statue of Cupid sharpening his arrows on a stone (“How appropriate,” thought Louise grimly, “for poor, innocent Harry”), a colossal statue of the Queen in zinc, and a display case of lightning conductors for ships (as used in HM Navy); all of these objects had once graced the Crystal Palace.

“You sit there, Lou, and, Miriam, you sit there,” Harry was proceeding commandingly. “That’s right, everyone. That’s the spirit.”

Astonished by how insufferable her brother had suddenly become, Louise could not help thinking that Miriam, who was older and in every way more mature than Harry, must object to being ordered about by him...but she did not seem to; she seemed perfectly content to be given orders. Yet nobody seemed more content than Lucy. “Shall I do this? Shall I do that? Is that the right way?” she kept asking Harry, turning to him meltingly for more gruff instructions than could possibly be required. Although Louise was still glad that she had saved Lucy’s life by sending that letter to the *dak* bungalow she could not help feeling that she had been rather taken advantage of...If you save someone’s life you do not expect them to start promptly making mincemeat of your innocent brother’s affections with melting glances and flashings of pretty smiles. Not that Louise would normally have minded a pretty girl like Lucy capturing Harry’s heart...to have their hearts besieged and captured was, after all, at least one of the things that men were there for.

What Louise could not forget, however, was that Lucy had been dishonoured. This lovely and quite innocent-looking girl who was sitting there with them now cheerfully eating pudding had allowed, perhaps even encouraged, certain things to be done to her by a man; she had perhaps allowed her clothes to be fumbled with and disarranged...she might even perhaps, for all Louise knew, have been seen naked by him. The thought of Lucy’s delightfully shaped body, of which she herself had inadvertently glimpsed intimate parts in the billiard room (for Lucy was careless where modesty was concerned), exposed to the eyes of a gentleman, was very distressing to Louise. She was ready to be friendly and forgiving to Lucy, and she was ready to believe that the sin had been less Lucy’s than that of her seducer...but she could not believe it a good thing that Harry should become infatuated with her. That a man (let us not call him a gentleman) should have been permitted to view that sacred collection of bulges, gaps, tufts of hair and rounded fleshy slopes which, as clear as the tossing arms of the semaphore on Diamond Head, signalled their own message: “Womanhood”; on this, apply cosmetics of exonerating circumstances though you might, Louise could only put an ugly complexion, for it added up to the betrayal of her sex.

But now it was time for Fleury’s birthday present to be handed to him and, once again, although the idea had been Miriam’s, the hard work had had to be done by Louise. With the Collector’s permission they had cut the cloth off the billiard tables and made him a coat of Lincoln green together with a cap of the same material, garnished with a turquoise peacock’s feather.

“I say, he looks as if he has just come from Sherwood Forest,” cried Harry gruffly in his new insufferable manner. “Ho there, Locksley! Ha, ha!”

“Oh shut up, Dunstaple!” said Fleury, delighted with his new coat and secretly pleased to be compared with Robin Hood. He put the coat on and turned slowly in front of the ladies, exclaiming: “What a splendid fit it is!” and indeed it was a good fit, even though one arm seemed to be rather longer than the other (“That’s so he can fire his long-bow the more easily, ha, ha!” cried Harry obnoxiously, causing Lucy to swoon with

laughter). “Thank heaven it fits, anyway,” thought Louise sadly. For some reason, she had no idea why, she suddenly felt close to tears. With one hand to her forehead, as if she were “thinking” again, she used the other one to give her collar a little tug to make sure no one could see her new boil, the one on her neck.

At this moment the Collector happened to pass through the drawing-room and seeing Miriam sitting with her brother and the young Dunstaples and Miss Hughes, could not help thinking how she still looked only a girl herself, even though she had been a widow for three years or more. They invited him to taste the birthday pudding, which he did, pronouncing it excellent and thinking: “What charming young people they are, to be sure. Why cannot every man and woman in India be so delightful to talk to?”

An expression of warmth had softened the Collector’s features as he knelt beside the group of young people to sample their pudding, but Miriam watching his face closely, saw the shadow return as he stood up. Perhaps it was the endless worry of the siege: he was always anxious, she knew, as dusk was falling, particularly at the beginning of a moonless night when the sepoys might make a surprise attack. Would there be a moon tonight? She could not remember.

But the Collector was still following his earlier thoughts and wondering how it could ever be that the hundred and fifty million people living in India could ever have the social advantages that made young people like the Fleurys and the Dunstaples so delightful, so confident, and so charming.

He left the young people and strode wearily through the hall, muttering to himself aloud: “Surely it’s impossible under any system of government or social economy?” The Collector frowned. A number of people lying on bedding in the hall among the lumber of “possessions” were watching him uneasily; perhaps they had seen him talking to himself. But again he thought: “Can it be that the Indian population will ever enjoy the wealth and ease of the better classes?” This was the melancholy question which had invited the shadow back over the Collector’s countenance and which, presently, pursued him out into the pitch-dark compound to watch the construction of a new line of defence and to assist in the nightly digging of graves.

17

The Padre had become harder and more cunning in the service of the Lord; otherwise it is doubtful whether he would have survived the first weeks of the siege. Nobody had worked harder than the Padre; he had done his best. But he was only one man, surrounded by sinners and himself a sinner, born of Adam.

As silk-worms secrete silk, so human beings secrete sin. There is a normal quantity of sin which, for their everlasting punishment, any community of erring humans cannot help spinning in the course of their lives. But what puzzled the Padre was the nature of the particular divine grievance for which they were now suffering such an extreme punishment. What could it be? He had asked himself this question many times as the days had crawled by. And now, suddenly, as he began to dig the first of the evening’s graves, illumination came to him. In the eye of his mind, whose blindness had been cured, the Padre again saw Fleury sitting among the children at Sunday school and shaking his head as if he did not believe in the Atonement. He paused in the act of digging, a heap of dusty soil on his spade. It could not be anything else. Their troubles had begun soon after the arrival of Fleury in Krishnapur.

He heard a footstep in the darkness. For a moment he thought that it must be Fleury himself, guided like a ram into a thicket. But it was the Collector carrying a spade. He had come to lend a hand.

“Three again tonight?”

“Alas!”

The Collector tried to remember who had died during the preceding night and day. One of these would be Peterson whose remains had been retrieved after dark; although only a few hours had passed the pariah dogs and vultures had already cleaned away the soft parts of Peterson’s face and the flesh from his arms, leaving only the hands; these hands on the end of his outstretched, skeletal arms, had the appearance of gloves and lent the corpse an air of ghastly masquerade. Another of the bodies would be that of Jackson, the soldier who had been singing the song about the Crimea in order to keep his spirits up in the hospital. Day by day his bursts of singing had become more infrequent until at last they had been silenced altogether. Jackson had spent his last days lying with flies fighting over his staring eyes in the middle of the stench and horror of the hospital. The Collector had tried to speak to him but had got no reply. He was not sorry that Jackson was dead at last. The other shrouded corpse was that of Mr Donnelly, an indigo farmer and a Roman Catholic, who had died of a heart attack.

“We only need to dig two, Padre. Father O’Hara will be here presently to dig the other one in his own plot.”

The Padre paid no attention; he was digging energetically. The Collector could see of him only the faint glimmer of his face and hands as he worked; his long clerical habit had rendered the rest of him invisible in the thick darkness.

“By the way, do we know which one is Donnelly?”

But the Padre remained engrossed in his own thoughts. His puny arms had become as strong again as when he had been a rowing-man at Brasenose; now the Collector, whose own hands had roughened like those of a member of the labouring classes, had to struggle to keep up with him.

“That could be a bit of a problem,” mused the Collector.

“I believe, Mr Hopkins,” said the Padre presently, “though as yet I have found no direct evidence of it, that there may be German rationalism at work within our midst. I hope I am mistaken.”

“Ah?” The Collector’s tired mind resisted the prospect of becoming excited over a possible invasion by German rationalism.

“Perhaps you are not aware of how the Church is ravaged in Germany, Mr Hopkins. In the universities there I have heard that unbelief is rife. Men who style themselves scholars do not hesitate to lead the young astray by directing them to study the Bible as if it were the work of man and not the revelation of God. It is said that a certain Herr de Wette denies that the first five books of the Bible were written by Moses and maintains that they were written at a period long after his death.”

“Oh, the Germans, you know...” The Collector with a shovelful of earth dismissed the Germans. But this attempt to soothe the Padre and render further theological exchanges unnecessary did not succeed.

“True, compared with the simple, healthy British mind the German mind is sickly and delights to feed on such morbid fantasies. But still, we must not forget how quickly unsound ideas can spread, particularly among the young and impressionable. They spread among the young like cholera! The German Church has no discipline; for its ministers it requires no adherence to the Thirty-nine Articles or to the Prayer Book. In Germany a clergyman can believe and teach whatever he wants, a disgraceful state of affairs. I hear there is a man called Schleiermacher who does not subscribe to many of the fundamental teachings of Christianity such as the Fall and the Atonement, but who is yet allowed to call himself a minister of the Prussian Church!”

“I don’t think we in England need be anxious...” began the Collector, but the Padre cut him short, waving his spade in the darkness.

“Rationalism! A vain belief in the power of the reason to investigate religious matters. Ah, Mr Hopkins, the abuse of man’s power of reason is the curse of our day.”

The Collector remained mute. He did not believe this last remark to be true. But he saw no prospect of the Padre listening sympathetically to his reservations and considered it fruitless to antagonize him.

“I say, you don’t happen to know which of these bodies is Donnelly’s, do you?” he asked again, indicating the three shrouded mounds of darkness lying beside the path.

“As we read in the Book of Isaiah: ‘Thy wisdom and thy knowledge, it hath perverted thee’!”

“Well, of course, there are some ways in which no doubt...” mumbled the Collector. At the same time he realized with a shock how much his own faith in the Church’s authority, or in the Christian view of the world in which he had hitherto lived his life, had diminished since he had last inspected them. From the farmyard in which his certitudes perched like fat chickens, every night of the siege, one or two were carried off in the jaws of rationalism and despair.

Another footstep sounded in the darkness. The Padre paused, leaning on his spade, his eyes feverishly searching for the identity of the newcomer. This time he knew it must be Fleury, guided to an appointment with him so that his heretical notions might be extirpated. The Collector noticed that while he himself was scarcely ankle deep in the grave he was digging, the Padre had already lowered himself to the level of his knees, for while the Padre argued, he dug.

Meanwhile, the burly form of Father O’Hara had loomed out of the shadows. He had a spade over his shoulder. “Glory be to God!” he muttered as he tripped over something in the darkness. “Did ye ever see such a dark? I’ve no mind for this at all at all. Are ye there, Mr Hopkins, sor?”

“Just at your side, Father O’Hara. Mind you don’t fall into the...ah...Here, let me give you a hand up.”

“Now then, show me the lads and I’ll be after taking mine to his eternal rest, God help him.”

“Hm, Padre? Perhaps you could tell Father O’Hara which is Mr Donnelly?”

The Padre knelt on the path beside the three dark forms and peered at them uncertainly in the dim light afforded by the stars. After a pause for consideration he said: “Mr Donnelly is the one at the end.”

“What! This little lad Jim Donnelly, is it? Not at all, not at all. He’s no more Jim Donnelly than I am meself. This big lad here’ll be your man.”

“The small one is Donnelly,” declared the Padre in a tone of conviction.

“Not at all. Sure, I’ve known him all me life.”

“I fear you are mistaken.”

“Indeed I am not! That big man over there is Donnelly if I ever saw him...He’s the very image.”

“Father O’Hara,” broke in the Collector with authority. “Both you and the Padre are mistaken. I happen to know that the man in the middle is Donnelly. Now kindly take him away and bury him in the appropriate place and with the appropriate rites.”

“But, Mr Hopkins...”

“Which lad is it?”

“This medium-sized corpse is the one you require.”

“Should we not open up the stitching to make sure?”

“Certainly not. The middle one is Donnelly without a doubt. Now take him away.” And the Collector returned to his digging. The matter was settled.

“Well, come along then, if you’re Jim Donnelly and we’ll put you in the earth,” declared Father O’Hara shouldering the medium-sized corpse. He hesitated for a moment as if waiting for a possible disclaimer from the shrouded figure on his back, then, as none came, he staggered away with it into the darkness. They could

hear him bumping into gravestones and blessing himself and muttering for some time as he groped his way towards his own plot.

So rapidly was the Padre now digging that to the weary Collector it seemed that he must be visibly sinking into the ground. The Collector, too, set to work in a more determined fashion, thinking with a mixture of virtue and self-pity: "I'm tired but it's my duty. It's right that a leader should bury with his own hands his followers and comrades." All the same, he was rather put out when the Padre dropped his spade for a moment to drag the shorter of the two remaining corpses over to measure against his half-dug trench. "He might at least have chosen the bigger one since he's dug twice as much of his grave as I have."

"Can I be of any assistance?" asked a voice at the Collector's side, causing him to jump violently for he had heard nothing and now a luminous green wraith appeared to be trembling at his elbow. But it was only Fleury. He had stopped by on his way back to the banqueting hall for the night's watch, still full of the energy generated by his love for Louise.

"Is that Mr Fleury?" came the Padre's voice.

"Yes."

A gargle of joy came from where the Padre was digging. Misinterpreting the reason for it the Collector said firmly; "He's taking over my spade for a while, Padre," and went to sit down on a nearby tombstone.

For a few moments there was no sound but the scrape of the spades in the earth; then, gentle as a dove, cunning as a serpent, came the Padre's voice. "I hear, Mr Fleury, that in Germany there is much discussion of the origin of the Bible..."

"Oh, is there?" Fleury's mind was still lovingly reviewing the birthday party which had just taken place; he was trying to remember all the charming and intelligent remarks he had just made in Louise's presence; he had done rather well, he thought..."I wonder what she thought when I said such-and-such and everyone laughed? I wonder what she thought when Harry was telling everyone about us spiking the guns? I wonder..."

"Yes," went on the Padre, making a superhuman effort to maintain his conversational tone. "It is being studied as if it were not a sacred text, by the method of philological and linguistic investigation."

"Oh yes, I think I may have heard something along those lines."

Louise, Fleury had noticed, had a way, while seated of shifting her position slightly with a thoughtful look. There was something so feminine about it.

"A great variety of opinion has been advanced," continued the Padre impartially, breaking into a sweat. "Now people think one thing, now another."

"You mean like 'the dancing clergy'...Some people think it's all right for them to do so, some don't?"

"I suppose the question of the 'dancing clergy' might be so considered," agreed the Padre mildly, but thinking: 'Surely the Devil is putting words on this young man's tongue!' "But I was thinking more of another much-debated question...whether the Bible is literally true or not?"

The Padre had uttered these final words as casually as his exhausted state and impassioned convictions would allow. He had stopped digging. In his excitement he had dug one end of the grave to a tremendous depth, the other hardly at all, so that the body lying beside it would have to be buried at a peculiar angle...But he was not thinking of this, he was waiting for Fleury's reply.

"Will the Padre never cease from these inquisitions?" wondered the Collector irritably. "Haven't we enough to worry about already?" He still felt displeased because the Padre had so selfishly snatched the smaller body.

The Padre was waiting for Fleury to reveal the thoughts in his mind about the Bible, but Fleury was having trouble seeing them against the radiance shed by Louise. What was it that he was supposed to be thinking about? Oh yes, the Bible, literally true or not?

"Frankly," he said in a mature and condescending way, "I tend to agree with Coleridge that it doesn't particularly matter..."

"Not *matter* !"

"...that the important thing about the Bible is not that it tells us that Moses did this or that...he may or may not have, for all I know, but I don't think it's important whether these German wallahs manage to prove it one way or another...in other words not whether it's literally true, but whether..." Fleury's voice took on a more solemn note, "...whether it's *morally* true, whether it appeals to and satisfies our inner spiritual needs. That, if I may say so, is the important question." After a moment he added, more condescendingly than ever: "I dare say our positions differ a trifle, eh, Padre?" This additional comment was designed to put an end to the argument...his thoughts wanted to hasten back to the consideration of Louise.

"The Bible is the word of God, Mr Fleury," exclaimed the Padre gesturing in the darkness with his spade. "How will you interpret the spirit precisely, man? How will you say it is this and not that? Every man will set to work subjecting the Bible to his own limited intelligence and end up floundering in apostasy. You will have men like this misguided Schleiermacher who pick and choose among the doctrines of the Church and who decide, puffed up by confidence in their own powers of reason, that the Fall is not a moral teaching or that the Atonement is distasteful to them."

"But if it seems clear that certain parts of the Bible are not, hm, moral according to our latest nineteenth-century conceptions of morality..."

"Fallen man is not able to understand the purposes of God," interrupted the Padre, who had thrown away his spade and was trying to ram the small, shrouded corpse into the hole he had dug in such a way that the

feet would not stick up into the air. “Human conceptions of morality must be fallible like all human ideas!”

“The letter killeth, the Spirit giveth life, all the same, if you see what I mean,” quoted Fleury feebly. He found himself unable to match the Padre’s positive assertions with anything better than vague equivocations. Nevertheless, like all intellectual young men he disliked coming off worst in an argument, whatever the subject. He fell into a sullen silence as the Padre continued to harangue him, and looked around to see if the Collector would be thinking of relieving him soon. But the Collector had left his tombstone and melted deeper into the darkness.

“You cannot escape the fact,” said Fleury, returning to the attack, “that our century has developed a morality higher and finer than anything the world has known before, based on the *spirit* of the New Testament, ignoring the letter of the Old Testament. The nineteenth century has witnessed a refinement of morality unknown to the antique world!”

“Thy wisdom and thy knowledge, it hath perverted thee!”

The Padre’s words echoed after the Collector as he retreated through the darkness and he thought: “Young Fleury is perfectly right...How arid the eighteenth century was in comparison to our own. They did their best, no doubt, but they were *at best* only a preparation for our own century. How barren in taste they were, how lacking in feeling! What a poor conception of Man, what fruitless ratiocination! Everything which they approached so ineffectually, we have brought to culmination. The poor fellows had no conception how far Art, Science, Respectability, and Political Economy could be taken. Where they hesitated and blundered we have gone forward...Ah!” He stumbled. A round shot, skipping through the darkness, landed in the mud wall of the churchyard, showering him with pebbles.

Somehow the shock of this narrow escape had a sobering effect on him and his confidence drained away, and with it his satisfaction with his own epoch. He thought again of those hundred and fifty million people living in cruel poverty in India alone...Would Science and Political Economy ever be powerful enough to give them a life of ease and respectability? He no longer believed that they would. If they did, it would not be in his own century but in some future era. This notion of the superiority of the nineteenth century which he had just been enjoying had depended on beliefs he no longer held, but which had just now been itching, like amputated limbs which he could feel although they no longer existed.

The round shot had also served to remind him of the new line of defence, the need for which was becoming daily more desperate. And so he turned towards the Residency to see how the new fortifications were progressing. Alas, the Collector knew that Machiavelli, another member of his staff of nocturnal counsellors, would not have wanted him to construct this second line of defence. It was the opinion of that cynical man that if a possibility of retreat existed, the defenders would use it, and thus bring about their own defeat. But there was nothing the Collector could do about that...Sooner or later he would have to reduce the perimeter of the enclave. Even at the beginning of the siege the ramparts had been too sparsely manned. Now, with two or three men dying every day and sometimes more, the interval between each rifle grew daily larger, and only the inability of the sepoys to concert an attack with all their disparate forces had allowed the defences to remain intact.

“Besides, Machiavelli was not speaking of Englishmen, but Italians...A very different matter.”

At first, the Collector had considered a new line which would form a loop around the Residency, the Church, and the banqueting hall, but he knew that the labour of digging an adequate trench and rampart over such a distance must now be beyond the strength of his garrison, who were obliged to fight during the day and dig at night. He had considered leaving the banqueting hall outside, but he soon realized that this was out of the question; it dominated the Residency...even if demolished its ruins would still command the Residency from an impregnable position. And yet the banqueting hall itself could not be defended for more than a few days because it lacked water. But he knew that there must be a solution to his problem and presently, by exercising his powers of observation and reason, he found it.

Among the many inventions in his possession there was an American velocipede. He had never found very much use for it in the past. At the time it had been designed no satisfactory system of pedals had yet been devised and he himself was no longer supple enough to propel it by one foot on the ground, as its inventor had intended. Once or twice, it was true, he had had an eager young assistant magistrate speeding erratically across the lawns on it to the amusement of the ladies and the astonishment of the bearers. But two wheels, he had been obliged to reflect, or even, come to that, a dozen wheels, would never match for speed and convenience the four legs of the horse. Now, however, this machine suddenly rolled out of oblivion into his mind as the very design required for his new system of defence...One large wheel, to include the Residency and the churchyard (whose ready-made wall could be incorporated), and a smaller wheel around the banqueting hall. All that was needed was a double sap (a single trench with a rampart on both sides) to join the two wheels.

This system had many advantages. The banqueting hall would act as a barbican to the Residency, protecting one entire hemisphere from a direct attack, the Residency doing the same for the weaker hemisphere of the banqueting hall. If the garrison continued to dwindle, the survivors could be progressively drawn back from the connecting trench into each wheel without necessarily weakening the whole structure. If

the worst came to the worst, one wheel could even be abandoned altogether.

When he had paid a visit to Ford, the railway engineer whom he had put in charge of the execution of this elegant idea, and had surveyed the progress of the night's digging, he turned away again into the darkness. Although exhausted, he dreaded the prospect of returning to his empty room to sleep. Once or twice, ignoring the anxiety of his daughters he had not returned to his own bed but slept instead cradled in the documents in the Cutcherry. He had come to love roaming about the enclave in the darkness; the darkness brought relief from the overcrowding of the Residency which disgusted him, from the danger of crossing open spaces, from the hot wind and, above all, from the eyes of the garrison which were continually searching his face for signs of weakness or despair.

Now the night had grown darker, increasing his sense of freedom. A low bank of cloud had spread across the Eastern horizon and was slowly mounting over the entire firmament, concealing the stars. A breathless silence prevailed and the heat had grown more intense. It seemed to him, too, though he could not be sure, that low on the Eastern horizon there was a glimmer of lightning...but perhaps it was musket fire or simply the flickering of those mysterious bonfires which nightly burned on the empty plain. "If it rains it will give us more time, and that's what we most need...Time to go as far as our food and powder will take us. After all, it's not as if we have to hold this place for the rest of our lives...But why has there been no word of a relieving force?"

As he passed near the churchyard again he heard the sound of the Padre's voice. The Padre's energies, as singleminded as a pack of hounds, were relentlessly running down the one or two heretical notions owned by Fleury which, dodging here and there like tired foxes, had still managed to elude them. Before lighting the lamp in his empty room the Collector crossed to the verandah and stood outside for a moment, watching the bank of cloud cover the shrinking patch of starlit sky to the west.

"We look on past ages with condescension, as a mere preparation for *us*...but what if we're only an after-glow of *them* ?"

He lit the oil-lamp on the table beside a dish of *dal* and a chapati which his daughters had left for his supper; his shattered bedroom slowly materialized out of the darkness, the splintered woodwork, the broken furniture, the wallpaper hanging in shreds from the shrapnel-pocked walls; this once beautiful, complacent, happy, elegant room was like a physical manifestation of his own grieving mind.

18

The Collector had half expected the rains to begin during the night, but when he awoke the sky was cloudless once more; he could sense, however, that they would not be long coming. Already the burning winds had ceased to blow during the day; the air had lost its crisp dryness and consequently the heat seemed more oppressive than ever. Clouds gathered again in the course of the next two days, but after an hour or two they would disperse. From the roof of the banqueting hall he could see that the river, which had been almost dry until now, had swollen greatly, it continued to rise during the night until by the following morning it had submerged the melon beds. This sudden rise of the river was familiar to the Collector; he knew that it was not due to a fall of rain in the district but to the melting of the snows in the high Himalaya. Usually it heralded rains even so, but this year the river gradually subsided once more. Clouds gathered several times but only to disperse again.

Among the disasters which multiplied in the enclave during these last days before the monsoon none came as a more severe blow than the death of Lieutenant Cutter. He had become a hero for the garrison, for English and native defenders alike. Many tears were shed, particularly by the younger ladies, while the Padre made his eloquent funeral oration after the mid-day service on Sunday the 12 July in the Residency cellars.

"Providence has denied his country the privilege of decking his youthful brow with the chaplets which belong to the sons of victory and of fame, but his deeds can never die. The pages of history will record and rehearse them far and wide, and every Englishman, whether in his island home or a wanderer on some foreign shore, will relate with admiration what George Foxlett Cutter did at the siege of Krishnapur!"

By this time the manner of Cutter's death was known throughout the camp and somehow it appeared disconcertingly trivial for a man who had so often exposed himself to such great danger. It had happened at the rampart by Dr Dunstaple's house where Cutter had just shot a sepoy the moment before and seen him fall; at the same instant he had caught sight of another sepoy levelling his musket and had said to the Sikh beside him: "See that man aiming at me, take him down." But the words had hardly passed his lips when the shot struck him. He had been on one knee, but had risen to "attention" and then fallen, expiring without a word or groan, or any valedictory comments whatsoever.

"I had no idea the poor fellow was called 'Foxlett', had you?" Fleury asked Harry. He had to struggle to convince himself that Cutter's heroic stature was not a tiny bit reduced by this peculiar name.

In the meantime the steady trickle of deaths from wounds and sickness continued. A growing despondency prevailed. A rumour spread through the camp that a relieving force from Dinapur had been cut to pieces on the way to Krishnapur. It was said that a massacre had followed the surrender of General Wheeler at Cawnpore and that delicate English girls had been stripped naked and dragged through the streets of Delhi.

Another disaster was the death of little Mary Porter, a child already orphaned by the mutiny. Mary had been playing with some other children in the stable yard and had suddenly fainted. The other children had called Fleury, who was passing. He had picked her up half-conscious, and while he carried her to the hospital she had clung to him with a pitiful force. It is a terrible thing to be clung to by a sick child if you are not used to it; Fleury was very shaken by the power of the protective instinct which was suddenly aroused in him, although to no avail, for there was nothing he could do. She was suffering from sunstroke and she died within a short time. Dr Dunstaple, under whose care she succumbed, was also strongly affected by her death. This was surprising when you consider that these days Death was the genial Doctor's constant drinking-companion. Perhaps he had glimpsed in Mary something of his own daughter, Fanny. Whatever the reason, the effect was terrible. He seemed to go out of his mind completely, raving about every imaginable topic from the Calcutta races to Dr McNab's diabolical treatment of cholera. The Collector ordered him to bed and both wards of the hospital were taken over by Dr McNab; but not for long. After a day or two of confinement in a darkened room he returned to the hospital and took over his ward again. No sooner was he back amongst his own patients than he set about exchanging the dressings applied by Dr McNab, even though they were in most cases identical to his own. When the Collector mentioned this to Dr McNab he shook his head and said: "Aye, the poor man has a way to go yet before he'll be sound."

Before the Collector continued about his business, Dr McNab asked him to come over to the window for a moment. He wanted to examine the Collector's right eye which had become red and rather swollen. The Collector himself had paid no attention to it, assuming it to be one of the many trivial ailments from which the garrison, deprived of adequate fresh food, was now suffering.

"It's inflamed, Mr Hopkins. Is it painful?"

"Not very."

McNab offered no further comment so the Collector went on his way.

The sight which greeted him now in the tiger house was a pitiful one. Hari no longer paced nervously up and

down; he lay sprawled on a pile of dirty straw, his eyes extinct. Around him lay scattered the festering remains of half a dozen meals. There was a powerful stench of urine also, as if he no longer went outside to perform his natural functions. He had turned grey, as Indians do when they are unhappy. His eyes were very bloodshot, like small balls of scarlet in his dark countenance, and his cheeks, of which the Collector had always admired the plumpness and the polish, were now hollow and covered with a dark, wispy down. Half buried in the dirty straw, beside a bone crawling with flies, lay the phrenology book, undisturbed since the Collector's last visit.

The Prime Minister was singing softly to himself when the Collector came in and continued to do so all the time he was there. It was a religious song and a joyful one, the Prime Minister's eyes sparkled. But they sparkled not outwardly but inwardly, for the deity which was causing him such intense satisfaction was inside himself. The Collector was astonished by how little the Prime Minister had changed during his month of captivity. He looked exactly the same except for his hair, which Hari had shaved off for his experiments and which had now grown into a furry black stubble through which the numbered segments of his skull could still be faintly perceived. The siege had simply made no impression on him whatsoever.

Looking at the Prime Minister the Collector was overcome by a feeling of helplessness. He realized that there was a whole way of life of the people in India which he would never get to know and which was totally indifferent to him and his concerns. "The Company could pack up here tomorrow and this fellow would never notice...And not only him...The British could leave and half India wouldn't notice us leaving just as they didn't notice us arriving. All our reforms of administration might be reforms on the moon for all it has to do with them." The Collector was humbled and depressed by this thought. He noticed that Hari was watching him with dull eyes.

"Hari, I've decided to let you go home. I suggest that you leave here before it grows dark so that the sepoys don't shoot you by mistake."

A shudder, as from a slight cough, passed through Hari's inanimate frame, but there was no other response. Hari continued to stare at him dully. At length, after some preliminary champing of his lips during which the Collector caught a glimpse of a white-coated tongue, Hari spoke.

"Mr Hopkin, it is cruel to torture with words. You do better to hang me from mango tree without more ado about nothing."

"Hari, how could you think such a thing?" cried the Collector, shocked. "This is no game. You're free to leave here and go home today. Look here, I know that I've treated you badly...But you must believe that I kept you here not because I wanted to, but because I believed it my duty to those whom God (or, well, the Company anyway) has placed in my care. Perhaps it was a mistake...perhaps keeping you here has done no good...I don't know whether it has made any difference, but now we're obliged to abandon some of our defences and it's certain that your presence can no longer help us. You'll be in great danger if you stay. You must forgive me, Hari, for keeping you here. This was wrong of me, I acknowledge it."

"You acknowledge, Mr Hopkin, you acknowledge! But you ruin health. I die of starvation and disease. I die of musket fire and you acknowledge."

"Please, Hari, you must not think badly of me. You must put yourself in my position. Besides, I'm not well myself...indeed, I'm most definitely sick," added the Collector succumbing to a sudden wave of self-pity for it was true, he did not feel in the least well. His right eye, which he had hardly noticed until Dr McNab had looked at it a little while earlier, had begun to throb painfully, and at the same time he felt feverish and nauseated, though perhaps it was only on account of the fetid atmosphere and the stench of urine.

"You must go now, Hari, and take the Prime Minister with you."

Every moment the Collector became more unwell. All the same, he found it pleasant to watch Hari reviving like a thirsty plant which has just been watered. Hari had already got to his feet and little by little was becoming animated again.

"When you're ready, go to the Cutcherry and tell the Magistrate. He'll stop firing while you go across to the sepoy lines. I must ask you not to tell them of our condition, however. Goodbye, Hari." The Collector had a feeling that even if he survived the siege he would never see Hari again. But before he had reached the door Hari had called to him, following him to the door.

"Collector Sahib, though I do not forgive bad treatment from *Sircar* and from British Collector Sahib, I do not wish to cause personal grievance to my good friend, Mr Hopkin. I like to make to Mr Hopkin as private citizen a small gift of Frenloudji book, which is the only object in my possession and to give him handshake for last time. Correct!"

"Thank you, Hari," said the Collector, and tears came to his eyes, causing the right one to throb more painfully than ever.

A little later from his bedroom, where he had retired for a rest, he watched through his daughters' brass telescope as the grey shadow of what had once been the sleek and lively Hari moved slowly over to the sepoy lines with, as usual, the Prime Minister dodging along behind him.

"I hope he doesn't tell them what a state we're in, all the same."

19

Now that the time had come for the depleted garrison to shrink back inside the new fortifications, accommodation had to be found for the ladies displaced from Dr Dunstaple's house. Volunteers from the billiard room were needed to move to the banqueting hall so that the new ladies, many of whom were elderly, might be installed in their places in comparative comfort. It was when he was on his way to the billiard room to ask for these volunteers that the Collector suddenly felt faint. The Padre, who was passing, helped him to his bedroom and offered to call one of the doctors.

"No, it's nothing. Just the heat," muttered the Collector, dreading lest he be taken to the hospital. "Send me the Magistrate."

When the Magistrate duly appeared the Collector, lying feverishly on his bed, asked him to take command of the garrison for a few hours. He explained what had to be done. The retreat must be carefully conducted so that it did not turn into a rout. He cursed himself inwardly for this sudden indisposition, which had come at the worst possible moment. Still, the Magistrate was a competent man. As an afterthought, he explained about the ladies who must volunteer for the banqueting hall.

But although they were terrified of the Magistrate, who in more peaceful times had so often savaged their verses, the ladies in the billiard room stoutly refused to volunteer for the banqueting hall, which they wrongly believed to be more dangerous than the Residency...except for Lucy, who was generally acknowledged to have nothing to live for anyway. As for Louise and Miriam, they had decided they must stay in the Residency in order to lend their assistance at the hospital, where the dispensers and orderlies could no longer cope. In the end, since there were no volunteers, the Magistrate was obliged to send the Eurasian women, half a dozen of whom had been quietly living in the Residency pantry and had spread their bedding on the pantry shelves. There were eight ladies to be accommodated. He still had to find room for two more, so he decided to banish the two foolish, pretty O'Hanlons from their billiard-table, sensing that they would make least fuss.

From the window of his room the Collector watched the final preparations being made for the hazardous withdrawal from his original "mud walls" to the new fortifications. Magnified as much by his fever as by the brass telescope to his eye, he saw Hookum Singh, a giant Sikh capable of carrying a barrel of powder on his back, stagger after Harry Dunstaple, emptying the powder in piles at the corners of the Cutcherry building and around pillars and supports. At the same time, a similar operation out of the field of his lens, was being performed at what was left of Dr Dunstaple's house. Fleury, Ford, Burlton, and half a dozen Sikhs, were digging a series of *fougasses* (holes dug slant-wise in the ground and filled with a charge of powder and stones), again with the intention of preventing the sepoys from converting their retreat into a rout. So far all the preparations had been made as discreetly as possible, under cover of darkness, but now the moment he most dreaded was approaching, the moment when the sepoys would realize that a retreat was taking place and would launch their attack. The Collector's hands trembled so badly that he had to rest the telescope on the shattered window sill. His face throbbed and his eyeball was seared by the white glare through which the dark figures of the men were moving about their work.

Shortly before five o'clock the sepoy cavalry made an attack near the Cutcherry but fortunately the men had not yet left their positions at the rampart. The attack was repulsed. The Collector watched this brief engagement in the dazzling circle of crystal but could no longer understand it. He saw a *sowar* hit as he spurred towards the Residency. He saw the man's limbs, tightly clenched as he drove his horse towards the Cutcherry guns, suddenly relax as if something inside him had snapped. Then he slithered out of sight into the dust.

Soon he could no longer bear to apply the scorching lens to his right eye and was obliged to hold it to his left, which he did more clumsily than ever. It trembled uncomprehendingly over Harry Dunstaple running towards the ramparts waving a sabre and shouting orders, with the bulging pockets of his Tweedside lounging jacket swinging about his knees...over Ford, carefully laying a train back to the wall of the church-yard from one of the *fougasses* that had been dug...over the Sikhs staggering here and there with loads of small stones to shovel into another *fougasse* not yet completed...over the green Fleury having a rest in the shade of a tamarind beside the Church wall...and finally over the pariah dog, looking towards Fleury with admiration but from a respectful distance (for Fleury continued to reject its advances). The Collector, his mind too feverish to recollect for more than a moment what all this activity was about, became absorbed in the contemplation of this pariah dog. Its mouth was open, its lips drawn back, and it appeared to be grinning. From the thin, wretched creature it had been at the beginning of the siege it had become quite fat, for recently it had succeeded in eating two small lap-dogs which had unwisely fallen asleep in its presence. Now it was ready for another meal and was keeping a hopeful eye on the battlefield in case some appetizing Englishman or sepoy should fall conveniently near...but most of all it would like to eat Fleury, such was the power of its love for this handsome, green-clad young man; it uttered a groan of ecstasy at the thought and a needle of saliva, dripping from its jaws, sparkled in the Collector's telescope.

The Collector, of course, was aware only of a loathsome, sinister, and rather fat dog...How he wished this animal were a fluffy spaniel! How delightful that would be! Tea on the lawn, spaniels at one's heels, scarlet and dark green...the colours of the rightness of the world and of his place in it! Even in his fever the Collector's amputated hopes and beliefs continued to itch.

But now the men were sprinting back from the ramparts. They were plunging for the shelter of the churchyard wall as a typhoon of musket fire swept the defences, kicking dust into a mist around the ankles of the retreating men. Some fell and were dragged on by their comrades, others had to crawl as best they could, their heads barely emerging from the puffs of dust, across the open space between the Cutcherry and the church-yard wall. On the top of this wall stood Harry Dunstaple, shouting and waving his sabre as if conducting an orchestra, shouting for the men to hasten, for the Cutcherry must be blown up before the charging enemy could reach it and disturb the train.

"Let us have tea on the lawn again!" shouted the Collector from the window, but no one paid any attention to him. His swollen, inflamed face had become unbearable now; he could neither touch it, nor refrain from touching it.

There was a flash through the haze of dust as Ford knelt to fire the train. Already the first squadrons of sepoy cavalry were swooping over the abandoned ramparts and racing for the Cutcherry to kick away just a few inches of that thin trickle of grey powder before it burnt its way home. The Collector's telescope had wandered, however, to the slope above the melon beds where the densely crowded onlookers were shouting, cheering, and waving banners in a frenzy of excitement. "How happy they are!" thought the Collector, in spite of the pain. "It is good that the natives should be happy for surely that is ultimately what we, the Company, are in India to procure..." But by misfortune his telescope had now wandered back again and was trained on the Cutcherry at the very moment that it exploded with a flash that burnt itself so deeply into the Collector's brain that he reeled, as if struck in the eye by a musket ball...And then there was nothing but smoke, dust, debris, and a crash which dropped a picture from the wall behind him. But at the next instant from the other side of the Residency echoed another, even greater, explosion...and that was the last of Dr Dunstaple's house.

The Collector was both clutching at his face and trying not to clutch at it. Yet he must somehow tear the pain out with his hands or he knew that it would kill him. A cheer rang out from the natives assembled above the melon beds; it could be heard even over the boom of canons and rattle of musketry. He had dropped his telescope; for a few moments he groped on the floor beside the window, but he no longer needed the telescope; he could see perfectly well without it. For a moment, as he looked out of the window, his mind became clear again and he thought: "My God, the sepoys are attacking. I must tell someone. I must warn the men." He could see the sepoy infantry advancing in hordes across the open ground from the direction of the cantonment. The cavalry had already ridden through the pall of dust and smoke that hung over the demolished Cutcherry and now they were ready to hurl themselves at the garrison, hastily assembled behind the church-yard wall. Less than a hundred yards from the wall they swerved and re-grouped for a charge as the infantry swarmed up behind them.

The Collector had become calm again. The reason was that his pain, although it was still there was no longer a part of him. His pain, a round, red, throbbing presence, sat beside him at the window enjoying the spectacle. Since Pain was paying no attention to him, he decided that he might without impropriety ignore Pain. He and Pain together watched a scene which reminded the Collector of the beach. How pleasant it is to sit on the cliffs of Dover and watch the waves rolling in. You can see them beginning so far out...you see them slowly grow as they come nearer and nearer to the shore, rise and then thrash themselves against the beach. Some of them vanish inexplicably. Others turn themselves into giants. As the sepoys, sensing that their chance had now come to abolish the *feringhees* from the face of the earth, massed for a great assault, the Collector could see that this time a giant wave was coming.

"This should be a splendid show," he murmured, and Pain nodded his agreement. The spectators from the melon beds howled with enthusiasm, threw things into the air, and hugged each other from sheer excitement as the charge began. For some reason it began in a thick snowstorm of large white flakes.

Now, as the cries of the spectators rose to a crescendo, they were joined by the familiar stomach-turning howl of the charging sepoys, which added an undertow of dread to the Collector's pleasure. Below him, Fleury raced along outside the churchyard wall under the bayonets of the galloping sepoys, touching off the trains to the *fougasses*. Abruptly, in front of the charging sepoys, who were already bewildered by the densely whirling white flakes, the ground erupted. Volleys of stones blew out of the earth.

Simultaneously cannons fired canister into their midst. The wave toppled, thrashed and boiled against the ground, but hardly advanced another step up the beach.

The sepoy officers shouted at their men and tried to rally them. This was the time to charge on, while the cannons were being re-loaded. Victory was theirs if only they would press on *now*! But the men were blinded and confused by the snowstorm. They could see neither their officers nor the *feringhees*...Then came a sudden, dreadful volley from their left flank, from the wheel of the banqueting hall. A few more seconds of hesitation and all was lost. The cannons were reloaded. Another deadly volley of canister and scarcely a man was left on his feet and capable of charging even had he wanted to do so. It was all over. Thanks to that providential snowstorm the attack had been repulsed. The survivors scrambled back to the sepoy lines pursued by a vengeful squadron of Sikh cavalry.

The Collector had been unable to see the latter part of this action, which had taken place in thick yellow dust and smoke (the snow having mysteriously ceased). But even if there had been no dust, smoke or snow, he would still have been unable to see it, because he was now lying on the floor beside the window, having fallen off his chair. Pain had come to stretch out beside him. Unseen by either Pain or the Collector, the fat pariah

dog in the shade of the tamarind was whining and jumping up and down with excitement at the prospect of a square meal or two, when all the fuss was over.

Fleury, exhausted and still quaking from his gallant dash beneath the sepoys' glistening bayonets, had slumped down with his back to the new rampart. He picked one of the snow-flakes off the parapet and began to read it, but it was not very interesting...just a salt report from some sub-district or other. He threw it away and pulled out the Bible, which he had stuffed superstitiously into his shirt to protect his ribs...He had heard so many stories of musket balls lodging in Bibles, not of course that he *really* believed them, but all the same...What he wanted to do now was to find some immoral passages with which to confront the Padre, thereby proving to him that this book could not possibly be the word of God (unadulterated, anyway). Now where was it that God commanded the Israelites to massacre the people of Canaan? That would do quite nicely for a start. The Padre (or God) would have trouble wriggling out of that one.

Meanwhile, the Magistrate had ordered the native pensioners to collect up the vernacular records and documents which lay in shallow drifts in the new trenches...all that now remained of the experimental greenhouse in which he had observed the progress and ubiquity of the Company's stupidity. More papers lay scattered thickly over the ground between the churchyard wall and the rubble of the Cutcherry but they could not be collected because musket fire once more swept the open spaces. The Magistrate did not mind. He had no love for documents. And these had certainly proved more useful than most.

20

Such was the emotion caused by the attack that it was some time before any of the defenders recalled that the Collector had not been feeling well and wondered what had become of him. There was the binding of wounds and examining of bruises to be considered, and the saying of prayers and sewing-up in bedding of those whose lives had been forfeit...and above all there was a great deal of talking to be done, for, as the Magistrate scientifically observed, nothing unusual can happen among human beings without generating an immense, compensating volume of chatter.

Fleury, as it happened, wanted to borrow a book and finding the door open took a few respectful steps towards where the Collector was sitting...which was on the floor, for some reason. The light was poor in the Collector's bedroom and Fleury might not have noticed how red and swollen his face was, had the Collector not presently fallen sideways, rapping his head on the floor. Immediately all became clear to Fleury and he drew back with horror, thinking: "Cholera!" Then he raced away to find a doctor.

But when Fleury breathlessly informed Dr McNab of his diagnosis McNab did not seem to take it very seriously. He said to Miriam, who was helping him dress the wounds of those hurt in the recent engagement: "The poor Collector has erysipelas. I feared as much when I saw him this morning."

Miriam knew that people can die of erysipelas and when she saw what a state the Collector was in, rolling on the floor in delirium, his face red and swollen, she received an unpleasant shock. Fleury was quite wrong in thinking that Miriam had been nourishing amorous ambitions as far as the Collector was concerned; on the contrary, throughout the siege she had taken great pains not to allow her feelings to attach themselves to any individual man. Once in her life already she had become attached to someone and had allowed herself to be swept down with him in his lonely vortex into the silent depths where nothing moves but drowned sailors coughing sea-weed; only Miriam herself knew how much it had cost her to ascend again from that fascinating, ghostly world towards light and life. She knew that if she were whirled down again it would be for the last time. But there was yet another reason: Miriam was tired of womanhood. She wanted simply to experience life as an anonymous human being of flesh and blood. She was tired of having to adjust to other people's ideas of what a woman should be. And nothing condemned a woman so swiftly to womanhood as grappling with a man. All the same, she was shocked to think that the Collector might not survive.

"It is not yet too severe," said McNab, "but it can spread quickly. We must give him nourishment for it's a very lowering, debilitating disease. I'll ask you to prepare beef tea and arrowroot, Mrs Lang. Your brother perhaps will not mind fetching them from the Commissariat. And a bottle of brandy, too."

While Fleury hurried away for the stores Dr McNab wrote down the details of the Collector's illness...Subject to rigors and vomiting, redness and swelling of the face, pulse 86, respirations 30.

"Why d'you write down everything in that book?" demanded Miriam sharply, irritated by the Doctor's methodical habits. She had a vision of McNab calmly recording the manner of the Collector's death, the way he had already recorded so many in the last weeks. He ignored her question ("because I'm a woman", thought Miriam) but smiled soothingly and said: "Will you look after him for me, Mrs Lang? I shall ask one of the other ladies to help you if need be. Miss Dunstaple perhaps. If he needs an aperient we must give him something which is not too irritating to the alimentary canal, such as castor oil. Above all, we must be careful not to exhaust him further. The poison of erysipelas is exceedingly depressing in its action. Our first object must be to antagonize the poison and at the same time uphold his powers."

The Collector started up with a groan, glaring wildly at Miriam, who could hardly bear to look at his red, bloated face.

"And we must keep him calm, as best we can. In addition to the beef tea and arrowroot, as much as he will

take, we'll give him half an ounce of brandy every two hours, and twenty drops of laudanum every four." At the door McNab paused and said with a smile: "I'm sure he'll rally with such a fine young woman to care for him."

With that he took his leave, sighing enigmatically.

As night fell, although the Collector became quieter (no doubt thanks to the laudanum), he remained delirious. The heat was extraordinarily oppressive. No breath of air stirred the Collector's mosquito net. Miriam sat wearily by the window, feeling the perspiration soaking her neck and breast and the hollow of her back, leaking steadily from her armpits and from between her legs, and causing her underclothes to stick to her stomach and thighs. From time to time she crossed the room, soaked a flannel in the tepid water of a basin, and pressed it gently against the Collector's swollen face. At ten o'clock she gave him beef tea and brandy. But he scarcely seemed to notice any of these ministrations. He gulped down what he was given but continued muttering urgently to himself. His daughters, Eliza and Margaret, came to gaze dutifully at their stricken father. They, too, had taken to helping in the hospital and Miriam could read on their pale, shocked faces some of the terrible sights they had seen; after a little while she sent them away to bed.

Time passed, perhaps an hour, before there was a knock on the door and Louise came in, bringing Miriam a cup of tea. It seemed at first glance that Louise was wearing a turban; she had saved her day's ration of flour and had made a poultice of it for a boil which had erupted on her temple; her other boils seemed to be growing slightly better. Miriam, too, had a painful inflammation on her shoulder which she thought would turn into a boil; indeed, so many of the garrison now suffered from them that Louise had ceased to feel ashamed. Still, she would gaze in wonder at Fleury's clear, though dirty, countenance and wonder why he did not get any.

"It's stifling. Let us sit by the window."

"My dear, you must be tired. Let me sit up and watch over Mr Hopkins while you have a rest."

"No, my dear, you are just as tired as I am, and I shall rest presently in the dressing-room where I have made up a bed for myself. If I leave the door open I shall be able to hear him if his condition worsens."

To hear these "my dears" being so liberally dispensed you might have thought that the two girls had become bosom friends. And true enough, in the last few days they had grown much closer to each other. They had so many anxieties and sorrows to share. They had both loved poor little Mary Porter who had died of sunstroke. Fleury, too, continued to grieve for her and was now composing a poem in which her little ghost came tripping along the ramparts sniffing flowers, unperturbed by the flying cannon balls (it was not a very good poem). The fact was that both young women shared an unspoken anxiety for Fleury's safety and though Louise had not yet confided her feelings for him to Miriam, she really did not need to do so for these feelings were plain enough already. Louise now greatly regretted having made Fleury the green coat, which she feared made him too conspicuous...and it was a fact that the sepoy sharpshooters could seldom resist trying to hit this brilliant green target. Out of bravado Fleury dismissed these fears as groundless, but he was secretly rather alarmed. Love, pride, and foolishness combined to make him keep on wearing the green coat, however.

"My dear, in a moment I shall have to call one of the bearers to assist Mr Hopkins with his natural functions in case it should be necessary."

Perhaps it was too dark for Miriam to notice how Louise was taken aback by this remark, how she blushed. Even though she had got to know Miriam so well during the siege she was still often taken aback by her boldness. In some respects, she could not help thinking, Miriam was just like a man the way she said things...sometimes even worse. What on earth would people think if Miriam started talking of a gentleman's natural functions in front of the wedding guests when she and Fleury got married; in some ways the prospect of such a solecism seemed more terrible to Louise than the possiblity of one or both of them not surviving the siege. Still, that was Miriam all over. There was so much about her that Louise admired, she could only suspend judgement on the rest.

But Miriam had noticed the slight intake of breath; she had been perfectly aware that Louise might be shocked by her words but she had spoken them anyway, partly because she felt too weary not to say what she meant, partly because, though she liked Louise, she sometimes found her sweetness and prudish innocence rather cloying and it gratified her to offend them.

"There seem to be more fires than ever on the hill tonight," said Louise brightly, hoping to divert Miriam from any further discussion of the Collector's natural functions. "How they shouted during the attack this afternoon!"

"I expect they thought they would be down here in a moment to indulge in carnal conversation with us and to murder us," replied Miriam rather cruelly, becoming blunter than ever. But this time Louise did not betray any signs of dismay. She was made of a strong enough fibre to cope with ideas to which she had already become accustomed, like murder and rape; it was novelty that she found hard to accept.

"And everywhere he is in chains!" cried the Collector urgently in his delirium, causing both young ladies to turn anxiously towards his bed...but it was nothing, merely a passing fancy in his overheated brain. He continued to gabble away under his breath and the ladies returned to their gossip.

"To be fair, however, it must be said that the natives on the hill also applauded the firmness and resolve

which the gentlemen displayed in our defence. Although, of course, it goes without saying another outcome would have pleased them better."

"How bright those fires shine in the darkness! How terrible to think that the men around them wish us ill!" sighed Louise. She tried to recall her life before the siege and the heads of young officers turning to look at her at the Calcutta race-course. Her mother had been so excited at the attention paid to her, almost as if it had not been Louise but she herself who was attracting the attention of the young gentlemen. As for Louise, strolling beneath the shade of her white silk parasol, she had remained so cool and chaste that she had scarcely deigned to notice that young men were admiring her. And yet, of course, she *had* noticed; the darkness once again hid the colour that rose to her cheeks at the recollection of the airs she had put on during those visits to the race-course. She had been so young and ignorant then; the most important thing in life had been the number of young men who were anxious to dance the opening quadrille with her. Her beauty had been something which had filled even herself with wonder; sometimes in the privacy of her own room she would gaze at some part of herself, at a hand, say, or a breast, and the perfection of its shape would fill her with joy, as if it were not a part of herself but some natural object of beauty. "*Eheu, fugaces!*" she thought and almost said, but was not quite sure how to pronounce it.

"Miriam," she said instead, "I cannot tell you how worried I am for Harry. He is so young and innocent; although he pretends to be a man he is still only a schoolboy. And now he is in such danger! I have tried to talk to him but he will not listen."

"But, my dear, there is no way that danger may be avoided whilst this dreadful siege lasts."

("The letter killeth, the spirit giveth life!" exclaimed the Collector fervently.)

"Alas, it's not physical danger that I fear for him...or rather, I fear that too, but since we are all in God's hands I trust that He will not forsake us...no, it's another danger that I fear for him. My dear, you cannot have failed to see how Lucy is leading him on. Think what unhappy circumstances would attend his career if he should now be trapped by a penniless girl without family whose reputation is known throughout India."

Miriam was silent. To worry that your brother might make an unfortunate marriage when at any moment he might be killed was something she found difficult to understand. But in a sense, too, she knew that Louise was not wrong to worry about Harry committing such a blunder, for Harry, moving in the social circles in which he *would* move, if he survived the siege, to the day of his death, would almost certainly suffer the inconveniences of having such a wife, would regret his marriage, and perhaps in due course would come to believe that his life had been ruined. He would be bound by the social fetters of Lucy's unsuitability simply because he too would believe in them.

"I don't think you should worry. Harry will probably get over his affection for Lucy once we return to a normal life again. And in any case, what Lucy may have done was surely not so dreadful and will be soon forgotten. A moment of foolishness with a man in one's youth, Louise dear, is more common even among the better classes than you might think. Lucy is much to be pitied. Let us worry about her future when the siege is over."

"But now she has gone to live in the banqueting hall where she will be able to use her..." Louise was going to say "feminine wiles" but hesitated, afraid that Miriam might find this ridiculous, and uncertain, in any case, exactly what "feminine wiles" might amount to. "...where she will be able to see Harry all the time," she corrected herself.

"With so many people under the same roof, my dear, Harry will be in no danger."

Presently, in the silence that followed these remarks, the two young women heard the sound of distant guns...more distant, it seemed, than the sepoy cannons which had been firing intermittently throughout their conversation; this sound echoed from across the dark rim of the plain. "Could it be the guns of a relief force?" Miriam was wondering as the first fat drops of rain splashed on the verandah.

"Rain! It's come at last!"

Almost immediately the first breath of cooler air reached them. The rain steadily increased in force, blotting out the fires on the hill above the melon beds, increasing the darkness until they could make out nothing in the compound below, and driving them back from the streaming verandah. Soon it had become a continuous deluge as if countless buckets of black ink were being emptied from the sky above them.

"In a moment it will be time to give Mr Hopkins another half ounce of brandy, poor man," sighed Miriam. The excitement of this first fall of rain had filled her with a desire that things should be different, that she should be happy again.

For the rest of the night the rain cascaded from the verandah roof, but the Collector paid no heed to it...he continued to mutter urgently to himself, thrashing weakly, possessed with the vehemence of a strange inner life where no one could reach him. The lamp beside his bed threw a faint glow over his swollen, passionate, tormented face.

21

On the following day Dr McNab made an incision in the Collector's right eyelid and a small quantity of pus escaped. Disturbed, the Doctor examined the rest of the Collector's body with care to see if there were any

further local formations of pus gathering beneath the skin. There was a danger that the blood would become poisoned by pus or by some other morbid agent which would render death by pyaemia inevitable. The Collector's delirium still continued and he was undoubtedly becoming weaker; because of these continuing symptoms McNab now substituted bark, chloric aether, and ammonia in effervescence for the laudanum and asked Miriam to increase the brandy to half an ounce every hour. Although he did not say so it was evident that he still regarded the Collector's condition as serious; the one hopeful sign was that his pulse had become fuller and less frequent. Convinced that he was going to die, his brood of terrified, velvet-clad children came to his bedside and stood there, the eldest holding the youngest, dutifully watching the thrashings of their parent, until Miriam packed them off.

For the moment the sepoys had stopped firing and an eerie hush had settled over the Residency. A night and a day of intermittent rainstorms followed. From the roof it could be seen that the sepoys had remained in their positions and were building themselves shelters. The garrison conjectured that the sepoys' powder had been soaked by the downpour...there was even wild talk of breaking out of the enclave and escaping to safety. But, alas, there was no sense in this. Even if they succeeded in breaking through the sepoy lines, where would they go? Where did safety lie on that vast, hostile plain? The silence continued, broken only by the shrieking and quarrelling of crows and parakeets. And now gaily plumed water birds began to appear on the rapidly swelling river. The birds had a new and shiny look; in India only the animals and the people look starved, ragged, and exhausted.

The heat, which had declined a little at the coming of the rains, grew more oppressive than ever. At night a clamour of frogs and crickets arose and this diabolical piping served to string nerves which were already humming tight a little tighter. The connecting trench was constantly full of water now, and because the firing-step was in danger of crumbling there was no alternative for someone who wanted to visit the other wheel but to wade through water and mud. The coming of the rains brought no physical relief to the besieged but in one respect it made things worse; the smell from the decaying offal and from the corpses of men and animals became intolerable and hung constantly, undisturbed by wind, as a foul miasma over the fortifications. While the lull in the firing persisted, the Magistrate ordered earth to be thrown over the rotting mountain of offal in order to cover it like the crust of a pie. But as soon as the next downpour came the crust was soaked, vile gas bubbles would belch forth from it and infect the surrounding air. The ladies in the billiard room kept a small fire of smashed furniture smouldering by the window and occasionally burned camphor in an attempt to palliate this tormenting odour.

But besides the lull in firing the rains did bring one advantage; the spectators were driven away from the hill above the melon beds. No longer did the garrison feel that their sufferings were taking place for the amusement of the crowd. But gradually even so, a new fatalism took hold of everyone. Some of those who did not possess a faith in God which was proof against all adversities now saw that the great hope of a relief force reaching them, which had so far buoyed them up, was an illusory one; even if a relief now came, in many different ways it would be too late...and not only because so many of the garrison were already dead; India itself was now a different place; the fiction of happy natives being led forward along the road to civilization could no longer be sustained. Perhaps this was in the Collector's mind as he lay there, silent and motionless now that the fever had left him and he was beginning to recover. By the end of the third day his delirium had diminished, by the fifth day it had gone entirely and the redness and swelling of his face had also begun to disappear. Dr McNab now ordered the stimulants to be decreased gradually from day to day, meat and beer from the stores being substituted for the brandy and beef tea. At last, he was convalescent.

The illness had aged him. He lay still for hour after hour, naked beneath a sheet because of the heat and humidity, the mosquito net cast aside for air, too exhausted even to lift an arm to drive away the mosquitoes which constantly settled on his face. Miriam or one of the older children of the garrison who could no longer play outside since the shrinking of the perimeter sat constantly at his bedside to fan him and to defend him against the mosquitoes. He said nothing. He seemed too exhausted even to speak or move his eyes.

Miriam, too, was very tired. Her body itched constantly and salt crystals from the drying of perspiration clung to the hair of her armpits and rimed her skin. Life no longer seemed real to her. As the hours fled by she was sometimes unable to remember whether it was night or day. In a dream, which was not a dream, she was called away to assist Dr McNab perform an amputation on a Sikh whose arm had been shattered by shrapnel. The man was too weak for chloroform and had to be held by two of the dispensers, yet he did not utter a groan throughout the operation. Afterwards she found herself back at the Collector's bedside in the same churning confusion of day and night.

"What's that noise? Is that the sepoys?"

"Frogs." Miriam could hardly believe that he had spoken at last.

"Then it must have rained at last."

"It's been raining for a week."

When at last he was able to throw aside his damp sheet and make his way to the window the panorama he had last seen on the day of the sepoy attack had been transformed. The glaring desert had turned a brilliant green. Foliage sprouted everywhere. Even the lawns had been restored, like emerald carpets unrolled before his eyes; sunblasted trees which might have been thought dead had miraculously clothed themselves with leaves. Only the new trench leading to the banqueting hall cut a brown gash through the green, but even there

green mustaches were perhaps beginning to cover the lips of the parapets...the Collector hoped they were: he did not want the ramparts to be washed away.

Presently Miriam entered the room and found him, half dressed, sitting on his bed with his head resting wearily against the pillows.

"Now that I've recovered we must think of your reputation, Mrs Lang."

"After all this, Mr Hopkins, do you think that reputations still matter?"

"If they don't matter, then nothing does. We must obey the rules."

"Like your precious hive of bees at the Exhibition? I'm glad you still believe in them."

"It's hard to learn new tricks," said the Collector smiling doubtfully, "especially when you reach my age. Have you any idea where my boots are, Mrs Lang?"

"Under the bed. But I don't think that Dr McNab would be pleased to see you getting up so soon."

"I must."

"Because of the bees?" And Miriam shook her head, half smiling, half concerned.

The Collector sat for a long time contemplating his boots which, because of the dampness, had become covered in green mould. His shoes, his books, his leather trunks and saddlery would similarly be covered in green mould and would remain so now until the end of the rainy season. The Collector wondered whether the garrison, too, would become covered in green mould.

He saw his reflection in the mirror as he was adjusting his collar; not only had his side-whiskers grown while he had been ill, there was also a growth of beard on his chin. He was shocked to see that this beard, unlike his hair and whiskers which were dark brown in colour, was sprouting with an atheistical tint of ginger, only a little darker than the whiskers of the free-thinking Magistrate. Later, seated dizzily at the desk in his study, he reached for a piece of paper to write some orders for the defence of the banqueting hall. But the paper was so damp that his pen merely furrowed it, as if he were writing on a slab of butter.

22

Now, as always at the beginning of the rainy season, dense black clouds began to roll in over the Residency from the direction of the river, advancing slowly, not more than a few feet above the ground and masking completely whatever lay in their path. These black clouds were formed of insects called cockchafers, or "flying bugs", as the English called them; they were black as pitch and quite harmless, but with a sickening odour which they lent to anything they touched. When the cockchafers arrived, Lucy, the O'Hanlon sisters, Harry, Fleury, Mohammed and Ram were all seated around a little fire in the middle of the floor of the banqueting hall not too far from the baronial fireplace which had unfortunately become impossible to reach through the stacks of "possessions"; this fire had been cleverly made by Lucy herself out of bits and pieces of smashed furniture; a large "gothic" chair of oak, which Lucy's lovely but not very powerful muscles had been unable to get the better of, lay on its side with one leg in the fire while the kettle hung from the leg above it, an ingenious idea of Lucy's own. Lucy had just made tea and was boiling the kettle again for another cup; by now supplies of milk and sugar were exhausted and tea had to be drunk without either. Harry was a little worried to see the water supply diminishing so rapidly but was pleased that Lucy was enjoying herself. She had gone through rather a bad patch since she had come to live in the banqueting hall. Once or twice, when Harry and Fleury had had to leave her to her own devices for a few moments in order to fight off the sepoys, she had become very upset and had made little attempt to conceal the fact.

Not long ago she had begun to talk of life not being worth living again and she had demanded that Harry should tell her, once and for all, why it *was* worth living. She did not seem to mind that she was distressing poor Harry by such questions. She had said that, in the circumstances and since he could do nothing but mumble, she would probably kill herself. She was so hungry...so tired and hot. When the rations were yet again reduced, that was really the last straw. No, she did *not* want some of Harry's handful of flour and *dal*! She wanted a decent meal with vegetables and meat.

Harry and Fleury conferred about this problem and decided that they would club together and see if they could afford to buy some hermetically sealed provisions when there was an auction, though with the prices that food fetched now in private barter they were not very hopeful. Fleury and Harry were becoming dreadfully hungry, too, but Lucy and the O'Hanlons must come first, of course. They had approached Barlow to see if he would be prepared to contribute, but Barlow had made it clear that he would not.

"The Eurasian women are managing alright so why can't Miss Hughes?"

The answer, as far as Lucy was concerned, was that she was a more fragile flower altogether, but if that was not obvious to Barlow there was no use in trying to explain it to him. The young men were very indignant with Barlow. Their indignation acted on Lucy like a tonic and she cheered up considerably.

A little while ago, Lucy had commanded her favourites to come and have tea. Her favourites included Ram and all the Europeans except Barlow and Vokins. Vokins, branded indelibly as one of the servants, had not even been considered for an invitation. She had also decided to invite Louise and Miriam, whom she wanted to impress with her domestic abilities, but only after a struggle in which she was torn between the pleasure of impressing them and the displeasure of having two more women and thereby disturbing what she considered

to be a favourable balance of the sexes. They seemed to have been delayed, however.

Her guests might have preferred to drink their tea on the verandah outside, since at that moment it was not raining. Inside, it was so hot and humid, and the smoke, which was supposed to vanish towards the great baronial chimney, hung in the air instead and stung your eyes. But Lucy's invitations were not open to negotiation, and none of her favourites had thought it wise to refuse. So now, although her guests had really had enough tea and would rather have been somewhere else, everyone was showing signs of impatience for another cup. But just as the kettle was coming to the boil a black cloud billowed in through one of the open windows and enveloped the entire tea party.

Fleury had not finished his first cup when this happened. As he raised it to his lips he saw that it was brimming with drowned black insects. Both his arms were covered in seething black sleeves, a moment later and his face was covered with insects, too, and they were pouring down the front of his shirt. He opened his mouth to protest and insects promptly filled that too. Spluttering and spitting and brushing at himself he dashed to a clearer part of the hall.

The cloud of cockchafers presently thinned a little, but everything round about lay under drifts of glistening black snow. The fire had been doused under a great, smoking heap of insects; the human beings shook themselves like dogs to rid themselves of the sickening creatures, which were showing, for some reason, perhaps because she was wearing a white muslin dress, a particular desire to land on Lucy.

Poor Lucy! Her nerves had already been in a bad enough state. She leapt to her feet with a cry which was instantly stifled by a mouthful of insects. She beat at her face, her bosom, her stomach, her hips, with hands which looked as if they were dripping with damson jam. Her hair was crawling with insects; they clung to her eyebrows and eyelashes, were sucked into her nostrils and swarmed into the crevices and cornices of her ears, into all the narrow loops and whorls, they poured in a dark river down the back of her dress between her shoulder-blades and down the front between her breasts. No wonder the poor girl found herself tearing away her clothes with frenzied fingers as she felt them pullulating beneath her chemise; this was no time to worry about modesty. Her muslin dress, her petticoats, chemise and underlinen were all discarded in a trice and there she stood, stark naked but as black and glistening as an African slave-girl. How those flying bugs loved Lucy's white skin! Hardly had her damson-dripping fingers scooped a long white furrow from her thigh to her breast before the blackness would swirl back over it. Then she gave up trying to scrape them away and stood there weakly, motionless with horror. As you looked at her more and more insects swarmed on to her; then, as the weight grew too much for the insects underneath to cling to her smooth skin, great black cakes of them flaked away and fell fizzing to the ground. While Fleury and Harry exchanged glances of shock and bewilderment at the unfortunate turn the tea party had suddenly taken, an effervescent mass detached itself from one of her breasts, which was revealed to be the shape of a plump carp, then from one of her diamond knee-caps, then an ebony avalanche thundered from her spine down over her buttocks, then from some other part of her. But hardly had a white part been exposed before blackness covered it again. This coming and going of black and white was just fast enough to give a faint, flickering image of Lucy's delightful nakedness and all of a sudden gave Fleury an idea. Could one have a series of daguerrotypes which would give the impression of movement? "I must invent the 'moving daguerrotype' later on when I have a moment to spare," he told himself, but an instant later this important idea had gone out of his mind, for this was an emergency.

Lucy was wavering. Any moment now she would faint. But they could hardly dash forward and seize her with their bare hands. Or could they? Would it be considered permissible in the circumstances? But while they hesitated and debated, Lucy's strength ebbed away and she fell in a swoon, putting to death a hundred thousand insects beneath her lovely body. Harry looked round desperately for the O'Hanlons to assist him, but the O'Hanlons had fainted at the very outset and had been dragged clear by Ram, who was now trying to fan them back to consciousness with a copy of the *Illustrated London News*. There was nothing for it but for the two young men themselves to go to Lucy's aid so, clearing their minds of any impure notions, they darted forward and seized her humming body, one by the shoulders, the other by the knees. Then they carried her to a part of the banqueting hall where the flying bugs were no longer ankle deep. But now they were faced with another predicament, how to remove the insects from her body?

It was Fleury who, remembering how he had made a visor for his smoking cap, found the solution by whipping his Bible out of his shirt and tearing the boards off. He gave one of these sacred boards to Harry and took the other one himself. Then, using the boards as if they were giant razor blades, he and Harry began to shave the black foam of insects off Lucy's skin. It did not take them very long to get the hang of it, scraping carefully with the blade at an angle of forty-five degrees and pausing from time to time in order to wipe it clean. When they had done her back, they turned her over and set to work on her front.

Her body, both young men were interested to discover, was remarkably like the statues of young women they had seen...like, for instance, the Collector's plaster cast of *Andromeda Exposed to the Monster*, though, of course, without any chains. Indeed, Fleury felt quite like a sculptor as he worked away and he thought that it must feel something like this to carve an object of beauty out of the primeval rock. He became quite carried away as with dexterous strokes he carved a particularly exquisite right breast and set to work on the delicate fluting of the ribs. The only significant difference between Lucy and a statue was that Lucy had pubic hair; this caused them a bit of a surprise at first. It was not something that had ever occurred to them as possible, likely, or even desirable.

“D’you think this is *supposed* to be here?” asked Harry, who had spent a moment or two scraping at it ineffectually with his board. Because the hair, too, was black it was hard to be sure that it was not simply matted and dried insects.

“That’s odd,” said Fleury, peering at it with interest; he had never seen anything like it on a statue. “Better leave it, anyway, for the time being. We can always come back to it later when we’ve done the rest.”

But at that moment there was a noise behind them and both young men turned at once. There stood Louise, Miriam, and the Padre, gazing at them with horror.

“Harry!”

“Dobbin!”

The Padre was unable to find any word at all; his eyes had come to rest on the golden letters “Holy Bible” on the back of Fleury’s razor blade.

“You couldn’t have come at a better time,” said Fleury cheerfully. “Harry and I were just wondering how we were going to get her clothes on again.”

23

“Forasmuch as it hath pleased Almighty God of his goodness to give you safe deliverance, and to preserve you in the great danger of childbirth; you shall therefore give hearty thanks unto God...”

At the beginning of August when the heat, humidity and despair reached their zenith in the Residency, when all eyes searched the Collector’s face for the signs of collapse which they knew to be imminent, two babies were born. One of them died almost immediately; its little body was dressed in a clean nightdress and linen cap and its arms were folded on its breast; then it was taken at night to be buried. Burial was a risky business now since the churchyard was constantly swept by fire, and for adults it had been abandoned. Mature Christians were dragged to the more distant of the two wells in the Residency yard and, without discrimination between the finer points of their creeds, thrown in. No doubt the infant would have followed the adults down the well, too, had not the Padre offered to take the risk of burying it. He could not bear the thought of it being thrown down the well, however dangerous the alternative. It was too like throwing rubbish away.

By some miracle the other infant, a girl born to Mrs Wright, the widow of a railway engineer who had been killed at the rampart some weeks earlier, survived. Mrs Wright was the sleepy young woman whom the Collector had found so desirable on the occasion of his visit to the billiard room. What was it that had attracted him? Perhaps it was her soft, drawling voice or the fact that, no matter how interesting the topic of your conversation, you would inevitably see her smothering amiable yawns as you talked; you would see the muscles of her jaw tighten and the tears start from her eyes as she tried to repress them. The Collector, for some reason, was attracted to ladies who were overpowered by the fumes of sleep in his presence, but not everybody enjoyed it as much as he did. The Magistrate, for example, when told that Mrs Wright had been taken ill, showed no interest whatsoever, and when further informed, a little later, that she had given birth, observed dryly: “I’m surprised that she had the energy.” This remark naturally made everyone furious. How typical of the Magistrate! The man was odious. No wonder he was so universally detested.

The garrison was extraordinarily affected by Mrs Wright’s baby. Even gentlemen who did not normally display interest in babies sent anxiously to enquire about its progress. And it seemed perfectly natural, given the circumstances, that the child should be named “Hope”, though nobody knew whose idea it had been originally...probably not Mrs Wright’s, however, for though in every respect resembling a Madonna, she was finding it more difficult than ever to stay alert. Only that drear atheist and free-thinker, the Magistrate, was seen raising a sardonic eyebrow at this name.

Now the time had come for Mrs Wright to be churched and the baby christened; every member of the garrison who was not occupied at the ramparts had assembled in the rubble-strewn yard of the Residency to hear the service, for it was no longer safe to hold a service in the ruined Church. A table which the Collector strongly suspected was his favourite Louis XVI had been brought out of the Residency drawing-room and covered with a clean white cloth to serve as an altar table.

“The snares of death compassed me round about, and the pains of hell gat hold upon me.” The Padre’s voice reading the 116th Psalm echoed between the walls of the hospital and those of the Residency. The Collector listened from the Residency verandah, his head uncovered, but seated because he still felt too weak to stand for long. Between the ranks of bared heads (one or another of which would occasionally turn to take a quick glance of inspection at his own face) he could just make out the graceful figure of Mrs Wright herself, kneeling on a hassock in front of the table. Beyond her, there were more ranks of bared heads, this time facing the Collector; their eyes, too, scanned him greedily, looking for fissures...and further away still, two or three faces of sick or wounded men watched from the open windows of the hospital. How haggard and bereft of hope they looked! The Collector shuddered at the thought that he might have had to endure his own illness within those walls.

'The Lord preserveth the simple,” came the Padre’s voice, quite aptly, it seemed to the Collector for he considered himself to be a simple man. “I was in misery and he helped me.”

His eyes came to rest on the tear-stained face of Mrs Bennett, whose baby had so recently died, and he suffered a pang of pity for her. How terrible it must be for her to attend this service for Mrs Wright whose baby had survived...and while the Padre was speaking the Collector accompanied his words with a silent, sympathetic prayer for Mrs Bennett: "O God, whose ways are hidden and thy works most wonderful, who makest nothing in vain, and lovest all that thou hast made, Comfort this thy servant whose heart is sore smitten and oppressed..." but the rest of the prayer was no longer in his mind, stolen no doubt by the foxes of despair that continued to raid his beliefs...in any case, it faded into a mournful reverie in which he sought an explanation for the death of Mrs Bennett's child. The Collector felt no confidence at all that her child had not been made in vain.

The lovely Mrs Wright, still on her knees, stirred sleepily and the Collector saw her profile mirrored in a pool of rainwater beside her.

"O Lord, save this woman thy servant."

The Collector's moving lips silently accompanied the response. "Who putteth her trust in thee."

"Be thou to her a strong tower."

"From the face of the enemy."

"Lord, hear our prayer."

"And let our cry come unto thee."

The Collector had pulled a grey handkerchief from his pocket to mop his brow and was gazing at it with pleasure, thinking again that he was a simple man at heart. The reason for his pleasure, as well as for the handkerchief's greyness, was that he had washed it himself...and really he had done just as good a job as the *dhobi* had been doing for the most extravagant prices. He had not washed merely a handkerchief either...his underclothes, too, had a grey look, and so did his shirt, whose grey cuffs peeped from beneath the dirty, tattered sleeves of his morning coat. He had done it all himself and without soap. Miriam had offered to do it for him, and so had Eliza and Margaret, and he could, of course, easily have given it to the *dhobi* in spite of his inflated prices. But it was the principle of the thing that mattered. He wanted to help those who were ashamed to be seen washing their own clothes but could not afford the *dhobi*'s new prices...While quite capable of overlooking more serious misfortunes, the Collector was sensitive to such cases of threatened dignity. And so, to the *dhobi*'s astonishment and terror, the Collector had suddenly materialized beside him at the water-trough. For a while he had stood there at his side studying how he worked, how he soaked the garments and slapped them rhythmically against the smooth stone slabs. Then he had set to work himself, though rather clumsily, he was still weak from his illness. Soon the slapping of his own clothes had counterpointed the rhythmic slapping of the *dhobi*'s.

The news that the Collector had been seen doing his own laundry caused a mild sensation at first and was interpreted as the long-awaited collapse, particularly by those members of the garrison who had once belonged to the "bolting" party. But then the other faction, the shattered remains of the erstwhile "confident" party, had argued rather differently...far from being a sign of collapse it was, in fact, a sign of the Collector's *resolve*, his determination not to submit to oppression, to fight back, in other words. Soon he was joined by other Europeans and henceforth it became a common sight to see one or other of the ladies or gentlemen of the "confident" party slapping away at the trough where once the *dhobi* had slapped (for on the day after the Collector's appearance the *dhobi* had vanished from the enclave, either because he considered it too dangerous to remain any longer now that the commander of the garrison had assumed the caste of *dhobi* or, more likely, because he resented the competition). But perhaps the general, median view that was held by the garrison of this strange behaviour of the Collector was that it signified nothing more than his eccentricity.

"Yes, I'm a simple man. I don't believe in standing on ceremony," the Collector congratulated himself piously. "But then, what else could I be when I look like a scarecrow and smell like a fox?" How ragged all these devout figures looked! One would have thought it was the congregation of a workhouse. Louise Dunstaple, who had once been so fair, now looked like some consumptive Irish girl you might find walking the London streets; in spite of the angry red spots on her pale brow she no longer wore the poultice of flour...the temptation had been too much for her and she had eaten it. To make things worse the women had now discovered lice in their hair. He had visited the billiard room that morning and his nerves had been set on edge by the distressing scenes he had witnessed. Yet the sobbing of the unfortunate women who had found lice in their hair had been easier to endure than the malicious pleasure of those who had found none. Why in such wretched circumstances, faced by such great dangers, did they still prosecute these petty feuds? The Collector had flown into a rage. In tones that had reduced the cannon outside the window to an occasional discreet cough he had lectured them on their duties to each other. They must help each other through these difficult times. If one of them found lice it must be a tragedy for all of them...they must comb each other's hair, help each other when they were sick, live as a community, in short.

They had listened meekly, shamed by his anger and, like children, trying to think of ways to please him; but once he had left the billiard room he knew that the feuds would start once more to germinate.

"Perhaps it is our fault that we keep them so much in idleness? Perhaps we should educate them more in the ways of the world? Perhaps it is us who have made them what they are?"

But the Collector was no better at suspecting himself of faults than of virtues. "But no. It's their nature. Even a fine woman like Miriam is often malicious to the others of her sex." And he remembered with

satisfaction, because it proved that he was not at fault, that Miriam and Louise had both approached him with some wild tale about Miss Hughes leading their brothers into debauchery and sensuality. Simply because the poor girl had happened to faint while not fully clothed! Ridiculous! He had been a little surprised that Miriam should surrender to this sort of jealousy, but perhaps he was not altogether displeased, because he found it feminine...in an attractive women even faults and weaknesses are endearing.

"Besides, Miss Hughes is made for sensual love as surely as the heron is made for catching fish. It's absurd to expect a heron to behave like a blackbird!"

Now the churching was over and it was time for the baptism to begin. The Collector was obliged to lift his heavy frame out of the chair on the verandah and advance to stand by the altar table, for he was to be godfather to the child. Meanwhile, the Padre had disappeared into the Residency for a moment. He came back carrying something draped in a table-cloth which, like a conjuror, he placed on the table.

As the Padre began the baptism the cannons fired almost in unison from the other side of the hospital and a faint stirring of breeze brought with it the brimstone smell of burnt powder. The infant, cradled in Miriam's arms, began to cry, but so feebly that its noise made hardly any impression on the expanse of open air. Miriam was smiling down at it while it squirmed and stretched, screwing up its tiny face and fists with the effort it was making. The Collector's mind wandered again as he thought of the baptism of his own children...how long ago it now seemed that the eldest had been baptized! Soon their own children would be born and he himself would become superfluous, an old man sitting in the chimney corner whom no one thought it worth their while to consult. He frowned at this suspected future injustice, but the next moment he remembered the siege and the fact that there was every chance that he would not live to suffer the humiliations of old age, and his thoughts promptly took a different line: "After so many hardships, how sad to be deprived of the tranquil evening of one's life!"

The Collector's face had assumed an alert expression, for the Padre was now addressing the godparents; but his still wandering mind was harrowed by the thought of the gentle, pious Mr Bradley of the Post Office department who, only the day before, had been deprived of the evening of *his* life, and the afternoon as well, come to that. By a singular misfortune Mr Bradley had been shot through the chest at the rampart when only the Magistrate was near at hand. And so the poor man had been obliged to die in as Christian a manner as possible in the arms of the atheistical Magistrate who had, of course, listened without the least sympathy to Mr Bradley's last pious ejaculations, impatiently muttering: "Yes, yes, to be sure, don't worry about it," as poor Mr Bradley, looking up into that last, glaring, free-thinking, diabolical, ginger sunset of the Magistrate's whiskers, commended his soul to God. "Don't worry. They'll certainly let *you* in after this performance," the Magistrate had said ironically as Mr Bradley made one or two more last-minute arrangements with Saint Peter for the opening of the celestial gates. Ah, what a terrible man he was, the Magistrate!

"Dost thou," the Padre asked the Collector, "In the name of this child, renounce the devil and all his works, the vain pomp and glory of the world, with all covetous desires of the same, and the carnal desires of the flesh, so that thou wilt not follow, nor be led by them?"

"I renounce them all," said the Collector, not very firmly, it was thought. Again the cannons fired, this time in succession. A vast bank of black cloud was mounting over the eastern horizon and advancing rapidly to bring the next downpour.

"O merciful God, grant that the old Adam in this child may be so buried, that the new man may be raised up in her. Amen, Grant that all carnal affections may die in her, and that all things belonging to the Spirit may live and grow in her. Amen."

"Hurry up or we'll all be soaked," the Collector exhorted the Padre silently. And then his thoughts wandered again and he began to worry about the speed with which the vegetation was growing around the ramparts. The grass, the creepers, the shrubs, the plants of every kind grew thicker every day, and the thicker they grew, the better cover they provided for the sepoys to advance undetected on the ramparts, but for some terrible reason, on the ramparts themselves nothing would grow.

The black cloud was right above them now and some of the congregation had begun to stir uneasily in expectation of the downpour, wondering whether the Padre would manage to get through the service before it fell. But even as he at last turned and, more like a conjuror than ever, whipped the cloth from the object on the table, which turned out to be a saucepan containing water scooped from the shattered font, the first heavy drops began to drum on the altar table; and while the Padre was saying: "Hope Mary Ellen, I baptize thee in the name of the Father and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, Amen," the Collector, forgetting that he had only just renounced an interest in the vain pomp and glory of the world, thought crossly: "That won't do the Louis XVI table any good at all."

24

Now in the banqueting hall another pleasant tea-party was taking place, even though tea itself was in such short supply that there was really only hot water to drink.

"Another cup, Mr Willoughby?" asked Lucy who, as hostess, was behaving impeccably. A wonderful change had come over her since the episode with the cockchafers. It was as if they had served to draw some morbid

agent from her blood, as if they had been a great black and damson poultice to draw off her petulant humours and leave her as placid as a Madonna. Sometimes, of course, she would still get cross with her favourites, but only when their behaviour fell below an acceptable standard, when they refused invitations and that sort of thing. But who would think of refusing Lucy's invitations, providing as they did the last vestige of a social occasion within the enclave? Evidently not even the Magistrate, for there he was, drinking his cup of hot water with enjoyment and gazing in fascination at his hostess.

It had not been a good day for the Magistrate. He had come to the banqueting hall in order to have a look at the river from the roof; the river had risen and widened so much that the entire countryside seemed to be sliding past and one felt as if one were standing on the deck of a ship. From the roof of the banqueting hall the *sal* trees on the distant bank might have been the masts of other ships. The Magistrate knew, alas, what would be happening when this great volume of water reached the depression made by the giant's footprint a few miles away...The embankments which he had vainly tried to have reinforced by the *zemindars* would now be brimming and beginning to overflow...within a few hours the country around the embankments would be flooded and ignorance, stupidity and superstition would have triumphed once more as they have triumphed again and again in human affairs since time began! With a bitter sigh the Magistrate returned his thoughts to Lucy.

Lucy herself said she remembered nothing of the dreadful cockchafer affair. She could recall seeing the first black insect flying towards her and then she must have fainted. The next thing she had known, Louise and Miriam were wrapping her unclothed person in a clean towel while, not far away, the Padre was discussing religious matters with Harry and Fleury. Louise and Miriam had been doing their work with set faces and compressed lips but that was doubtless because of the smell of the insects which was frightful. True, they had behaved coldly to her afterwards but that was probably because they were envious of the success of her tea parties, to which she did not always feel obliged to invite them...But why *should* she always invite them? She hated having nothing but women around her. Why did they not give tea parties for their own men (if they were able to find any)?

"Can I top you up, Mr Willoughby?" asked Lucy in the most polished social manner that anyone could desire, and soon the Magistrate was drinking his third cup of hot water, and still gazing at her in fascination, or to be more precise, at the back of her neck, which was the part of her which most interested him. Lucy was quite pleased by the Magistrate's interest and was considering making him one of her favourites.

The Magistrate had long been interested in Lucy but not because Cupid had at last managed to lodge an arrow in his stony heart. Alas, it was for a less creditable reason...it was because he wanted, though for the loftiest scientific purposes, to take advantage of her. Until now the Magistrate had been in the position of a scientist who has made a discovery which he knows to be true but is unable to prove. For years it had been evident to him that the phrenological system was sound and he had been tormented by his inability to demonstrate it to people who, like the Collector, were inclined to scoff. But now, at last, in Lucy he had a person ideally suited to his purposes...a person who was subject to a very powerful propensity. Lucy was Amative. Nobody could deny Lucy's Amativeness. Not only had she a history of past Amativeness (the fact that she was a "fallen woman" and so forth), but anyone who looked at her could see Amativeness written all over her. She positively glowed with it. Nobody, no scientist anyway, would or could deny that Lucy had this propensity to an extraordinary degree, of this the Magistrate was sure. So all that remained for him to do was to demonstrate that Lucy's organ of Amativeness was extraordinarily well developed. He was in no doubt but that this was the case. But for the moment, as ill-luck would have it, he was unable to verify it. The trouble was that the organ was in a rather awkward situation at the base of the skull, below the inion (that is, the external occipital protuberance), a part of the body which, in most ladies, Nature has thoughtfully cloaked with a fine growth of hair. The Magistrate licked his lips and took a swig of hot water. He did not know quite what to do about this.

Now you can tell how well developed an organ is in two ways: either by seeing how big it is, or by feeling the heat it generates. As a matter of interest, this very organ of Amativeness was first brought to the attention of its discoverer, Professor Gall, when he noticed its unusual heat in a hysterical widow. But for the Magistrate one way presented as many difficulties as the other. For the very reason that he could not lift Lucy's dark tresses and have a look, he could not slip his hand on to her neck. To a person more interested in the advance of science he might perhaps have tried to explain what he was after, but with Lucy he perceived that this would not be a success. What was he to do? He could think of nothing but disguising himself and rushing her on a dark night. He would need only the briefest of feels. Full of hot water, he belched dejectedly.

As he rose to take his leave the Magistrate thought again of the stupidity of the *zemindars* who had refused to reinforce the embankments; near him, in the lumber of possessions, was an oil painting of a stag at bay: that was just how he felt himself...Reason being savaged by a pack of petty stupidities which, because of their number, would in the end bring him down. His ginger-clad lips parted and he belched again, more dejectedly than ever.

A few miles away, however, a handful of confident *zemindars* were standing on the embankment with the water almost licking their sandals. There were a number of Brahmin priests there too, and a man holding a black goat. Everyone was chuckling nostalgically at the thought of the Magistrate, who was very likely dead by now. One of them asked another if he remembered how the Magistrate Sahib had tried to make them

strengthen the embankments and this caused such merriment that one of the landowners almost fell into the water. In due course the black goat was sacrificed with the appropriate ceremonies to appease the river and nobody was in the least surprised when, little by little, the river began to fall. By the following morning, aided by another black goat for good measure, it had dropped several inches and the worst was over.

Although the level of the river had begun to drop, there was no corresponding decrease in the rain that continued to pour out of the skies. If anything, it grew worse. And heavy rain, at this period of the siege, was something that the garrison could have well done without. The truth was that as the days went by and the heavy rain showed no sign of slackening for very long it became clear that something very frightening had begun to happen. The earthen ramparts which had been hastily thrown up to give substance to the Collector's revised plan of fortification were steadily melting away beneath the drumming rain. The fortifications were vanishing before the garrison's startled eyes!

Something clearly had to be done, and done quickly, for the ramparts were not diminishing at a steady rate...the longer the rain lasted, the more quickly the ramparts melted. Where a week ago a man could stand up to his full height behind them without being seen, now he had to stoop; tomorrow, perhaps, he would have to get down on his hands and knees. Action must be taken immediately. All eyes followed the Collector as he strode about the enclave grimacing and muttering to himself.

When the garrison had begun to give up hope that he would act, he at last did something. Even though members of the erstwhile "bolting" party had declared him incapable of any further action and took a gloomy view in general of his morale, he somehow mustered his last resources and confounded their gloomy forecast by leading out a party of Sikhs and native pensioners to shovel under the downpour. The "confident" party were all the more delighted because even they had come to entertain one or two small doubts. But the Collector, always inclined to be moody and difficult, had taken on a persecuted look again. As the garrison watched him from the shelter of the verandah they could tell that the rain was having a bad effect on him; he clearly did not like the way it beat on his head and shoulders raising a fine spray; nor did he seem partial to the way it poured down the neck of his shirt and coursed down his trouser legs. He was seen to cast frequent despairing glances at the sky, at the melting rampart, and, indeed, in every conceivable direction; despairing glances were aimed positively everywhere.

The rain had also altered his appearance. His once magnificent ruff of side-whiskers had been slicked down against his cheeks like wet fur and his ears had flattened apprehensively against his head. Only his beard continued to grow these days, for he had given up shaving; a bad sign. The longer his beard grew the more ginger it became; another bad sign. No longer did he lecture people on the splendours of the Exhibition or on the advance of civilization. Civilization might be standing rock still, or even going backwards, for all the Collector seemed to care these days. It was clearly all up with the Collector. But still, he stayed out there shovelling, confounding the pessimists...even though his task was clearly hopeless. You dug up a spadeful of earth, but by the time you threw it on the rampart it was nothing but muddy water.

In due course, however, the Collector had to give up the idea of shovelling under these conditions. The rain was too heavy. He issued an order that all the able-bodied men in the garrison should turn out with shovels during the rare intervals between the downpours. From then on, by day and night, the garrison laboured to keep that shield of earth between themselves and the sepoys. The Collector had the remaining wooden shutters stripped off the Residency windows and dug into the mud of the ramparts to prevent them melting. But to no avail...they continued to wash away in streams of yellow-brown water.

Why would nothing grow on the ramparts? Everywhere else the ground was held solid under the rain by the vast grip of the vegetation which had so rapidly sprung up. But on the ramparts nothing appeared; when the Collector tried transplanting weeds, bushes, vegetation of every kind, within a few hours everything had wilted.

In desperation then he ordered certain solid objects in the Residency to be carried out to arrest that dreadful bleeding away of earth. The furniture was the first to go. He strode about the Residency and the banqueting hall, followed by those men who were still strong enough to lift heavy objects. Every now and again, without a word, he would point at some object, a chair perhaps, or a sideboard or a marquetry table which had graced some Krishnapur drawing-room, and his henchmen would dart forward, seize it, and carry it away. Can you imagine how the owner of a fine chesterfield sofa must have felt to see it thus frogmarched away to its doom under the lashing rain? At this stage the Collector seemed to be sparing only occupied beds and *charpoys*, his own desk and chair, and the Louis XVI table from the drawing-room. Disputes arose. More than one unwary member of the garrison found that his bed had vanished while he had been defending the rampart against a sepoy assault. Sometimes a person would arrive just as the divan on which he had been sleeping was dragged away.

Sofas and tables, beds, chests, dressers and hatstands were thrown on to, or upended along, the ramparts, but still their strange haemophilia continued. Now the Collector's finger was pointing at other objects, including even those belonging to himself. Statues were pointed at and the shattered grand piano from the drawing-room in the hope that they might help, if only a little, to shore up the weakest banks of soil. For the Collector knew that he had to have earth as a cushion against the enemy cannons; brickwork or masonry

splinters or cracks, wood is useless; only earth is capable of gulping down cannon balls without distress. But still it continued to wash away, around the edges of tables, between the legs and fingers of statues. After each fresh deluge only the skeleton of solid objects, the irregular vertebrae of furniture, trunks, packing-cases and other miscellaneous objects, was left standing over the swamp. Even the trench behind the rampart would be brimming with oozing earth.

When the supply of heavy furniture, and of the more ponderous artistic objects, had been exhausted, there began the rape of "the possessions" which had so long encumbered the Residency and the banqueting hall. Very often the last journeys of these beloved objects were accomplished to the tune of distressing protests, or of heart-rending pleas for clemency. You would have thought that there was no one better fitted in the world to understand these pleas than the Collector. He, at least, was qualified to perceive the beauty and value of "the possessions". Yet he accompanied their tumbrils without a word, his eyes blank and bloodshot, his fur slicked down, his ears still flattened against his skull.

But although a great deal of solid matter had soon accumulated on one or other side of the ramparts and sometimes on both, it had little or no effect. It was like trying to shore up a wall of quicksand. The Collector resorted to even more desperate remedies. He had the banisters ripped off the staircase, for example, but that did no good either. So in the end he took to pointing at the last and most precious of "the possessions"...tiger-skins, bookcases full of elevating and instructional volumes, embroidered samplers, teasets of bone china, humidors and candlesticks, mounted elephants' feet, and rowing-oars with names of college eights inscribed in gilt paint; the ladies were instructed to improvise sandbags out of linen sheets and pillowslips and fine lace tablecloths. In this last period of devastation even the gorse bruiser and the rest of the Collector's inventions met their doom.

So impassive and peculiar had the Collector become, so obviously on the verge, everyone thought so (you would have thought so yourself if you had seen him at this time), of giving up the ghost, that his face was scrutinized more closely than ever for any trace of remorse as the gorse bruiser was carried out. But by not so much as a flicker of an eyebrow did he betray his emotion. In the matter of these smaller "possessions", you might have thought that he would have let you get away with the things which you could not possibly do without, a set of fish-knives, for example, which had been a wedding present, or a sketch of the Himalayas as seen from Darjeeling. But the Collector remained quite implacable. It was almost as if he enjoyed what he was doing.

Soon the Residency and the banqueting hall were virtually stripped. How naked the drawing-room and the dining-room seemed. Beneath the chandeliers only the Louis XVI table, the Queen in zinc (for patriotic reasons), a few objects in electrometal such as *Fame scattering petals on Shakespeare's tomb* with the heads of certain men of letters, and a few stuffed birds in the rubble of plaster and brickwork brought down by the sepoy cannons, remained. I think that perhaps the snake in alcohol was left too. And only then, at long last, when almost everything was gone, did the terrible rain relent just enough for the ramparts to stop their melting.

While the ramparts had been melting, the jungle beyond them had been growing steadily thicker. The officer posted on the tower beneath the flagstaff could now, because of the foliage, scarcely detect an enemy sortie even during the brief periods of moonlight. When the rain was falling and the sky was overcast the number of men on watch at night had had to be doubled, men already exhausted by lack of food and the interminable restoration of the ramparts. One thing was clear: it was as important to clear away the vegetation close to the ramparts as it was to maintain the ramparts themselves. There was already enough cover for a large number of sepoys to approach very close to the enclave without being detected.

Was enough being done about the vegetation? Indeed, was anything at all being done? This was the question, an understandable one in the circumstances, that the garrison soon began to ask. Any moment now they expected that the Collector would make up his mind to do something about it. But he did not seem to be in any hurry. What he was expected to do exactly, nobody quite knew. The vegetation clearly could not be burned off. It was too wet for that. As for cutting it away, it was obvious that to wander about on the other side of the rampart was to invite certain death. The only idea that seemed feasible was for the Collector to put on the rusty suit of armour which stood in the banqueting hall and to go out there with a scythe. But when this idea was mentioned to him he said nothing. He showed no enthusiasm. It was plain that he was in no hurry to execute it.

In the end it was Harry Dunstaple who approached him with a really sensible idea. They must fire chain shot. If chain shot were capable of removing a ship's rigging it should do the same for the jungle.

"We haven't got any," said the Collector.

"We have some chains. There's a pile of them in the stables. We could cut them into lengths if we had a file."

"Have we a file? Yes, so we have."

The Collector remembered that he not only had a file but a fine British one at that. He went upstairs to his shattered bedroom to fetch it for Harry. He had often wished for an opportunity to try out this splendid tool in peaceful days gone by. But the Resident even of a relatively unimportant station like Krishnapur cannot really

allow himself to file things, even surreptitiously. The natives would quickly lose their respect for the Company if he did.

This file, or one identical to it, had emerged the victor of a curious contest at the Exhibition between Turtons' English Files and a French company which manufactured another brand of file. Even though Turtons' had selected their file indiscriminately from stock to do battle with the French champion, even though the French company had brought over a special engineer to manipulate their product while Turtons' had picked a man at random from the Sappers and Miners at the Exhibition, the French file had been humiliated. Two pieces of steel had been fixed in vices and the two men had set to work on them simultaneously. What a cheer had gone up as the Englishman with Turtons' file had filed the steel down to the vice before the Frenchman was one third the way through! As he stood by the glass cabinet in his bedroom where the file had reclined on a couch of red velvet since the Exhibition recuperating from its victory, the Collector remembered, with amazement and disgust at his petty chauvinism, how pleased he had been by this trivial affair. He was frowning as he took the victor downstairs to Harry.

"Where shall I start the operation, Mr Hopkins?" Harry wanted to know.

Several people were standing nearby when the Collector made his reply to this reasonable question. They all heard clearly what he said, difficult though they found it to believe. He said: "Please yourself."

Even Harry, who was not unaccustomed to the caprices of superiors, could not help looking astonished.

"Please yourself," repeated the Collector in a flat tone. "I'm going to bed. If you have any questions ask the Magistrate."

One or two of the bystanders, filled with dread, knowing already that the catastrophe had occurred but unable to prevent themselves verifying the fact, discreetly consulted their time-pieces. It was as they thought. The time was not yet noon.

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While the Collector went off to bed in the middle of the day, Harry made a round of the Residency wheel accompanied by the giant Sikh, Hookum Singh, festooned in lengths of chain. Soon the chain was singing out through the foliage, cutting empty avenues through the greenery. The garrison kept an eye on the Collector's bedroom, expecting to see his face appear for an inspection of Harry's work. Although worried by the expense in powder Harry continued to open one green avenue after another, but the Collector's window remained empty.

As one day followed another the garrison could not help wondering what was going on behind the Collector's closed door. Very likely he was simply lying on his bed in a state of dejection and, perhaps, of remorse for his massacre of "the possessions" which was now generally thought not to have been necessary. They pictured him lying abandoned to the grip of despair. He was believed to sleep a good deal and to groan occasionally. On one occasion the door to his bedroom was left open and if you had passed along the corridor you could have caught a glimpse of the Collector, slumped on his bed, haggard and ginger-whiskered, the very picture of despair. The siege was being left to pursue its course without the participation of its principal author, the begetter of "mud walls" and cunning fortifications. No wonder that people grew despondent.

The garrison, in spite of everything and without the assistance of the Collector, continued to labour between one downpour and the next to prevent their walls of mud from oozing back into the plain from which they had been dug, but the number of men available to wield a shovel had suddenly begun to decrease alarmingly. This was not because of the enemy fire, which was less frequent now than it had ever been, for evidently the sepoys had decided to bide their time until the end of the rains. It was because an epidemic of cholera, with black banners fluttering, was advancing in solemn, deadly procession through the streets of the enclave.

In the hospital the constant retching of the cholera patients made breathing a torment; the air was alive with flies which crawled over your face and beneath your shirt, covered the food of those who were able to eat, and floated in their tea. The Padre found that they even sometimes flew into his throat while he was reading or praying with a dying man. By the last week of August the mortal sickness in the wards had become so general that he could no longer hope to pray individually with the dying. The best he could do was to take up a central position in the ward, using a chair for a hassock, and to make a general supplication for all the patients collectively. Afterwards, he would read aloud from the Bible, but with difficulty because the letters on the page seemed to crawl before his eyes like flies, and sometimes *were* flies. Once, in a moment of despair, he snapped his Bible shut and squashed them to a paste.

It was in these unpromising circumstances that the great cholera controversy, which had been smouldering for some time, at last burst into flame. The rift between the two doctors had grown steadily wider as the siege progressed. It had become clear to the garrison that not only did the doctors sometimes apply different remedies to the same illness, in certain cases these remedies were diametrically opposed to each other. So what was a sick man to do? As cholera began its measured advance through the garrison people instructed their friends privately as to which doctor they should be carried to in case of illness.

Certain people, perhaps because they were friendly with one doctor but held a higher opinion of the

professional ability of the other, took to carrying cards in their pockets which gave the relevant instructions in case they should find themselves too far gone to claim the doctor they wanted. Sometimes, too, there was evidence on these cards of the conflicts which were raging in the minds of the garrison. You might read: “In case of cholera please carry the bearer of this card to Dr Dunstaple”...the name of Dr McNab being carefully scratched out and that of Dr Dunstaple substituted. And you might even find the names of both doctors scratched out and substituted more than once, such was the atmosphere of indecision which gripped the enclave.

Of the two doctors it was undoubtedly Dr Dunstaple who had the largest number of adherents; he had been the civil surgeon in Krishnapur for some years and was known to everyone as a kindly and paternal man. In more peaceful times he had assisted many of the ladies of the cantonment in childbirth. Besides, he was what they felt a doctor ought to be: a family man, with authority and good humour. After all, when you are ill, or when someone whom you love is ill, what you most want is someone to take the responsibility. Dr Dunstaple was very good at doing this.

By contrast, though Dr McNab also possessed authority and combined it with a calm and dignified manner, he seemed to lack Dr Dunstaple’s good humour. He seldom smiled. He seemed to take a pessimistic view of your complaint, whatever it was. No doubt this was only his manner. Scots very often appear bleak in the eyes of the English. But the garrison, distressed by the revelation that Dr McNab had actually written a description in his diary of his own wife’s death by cholera, feared that in the case of Dr McNab even the caricature of a Scot might be mild in comparison with the truth; they could think of few less tantalizing prospects than that their deaths should become medical statistics. On the other hand, nobody could have failed to notice that Dr Dunstaple was in a state approaching nervous collapse. His denunciations and his shouting made even his staunchest admirers wonder sometimes whether it might not be better to change their allegiance to the calmer Dr McNab. But, of course, there was still no getting round the fact that Dr Dunstaple was the more experienced, and hence the more reliable, of the two.

It was after the evening service in the vast cellar beneath the Residency that Dr Dunstaple suddenly chose to speak his mind. Hardly had the Padre finished saying the *Nunc Dimittis* when the Doctor, who had been kneeling innocently in the front row, sprang to his feet. While skirts were still rustling and prayer-books being closed, he shouted: “Cholera!” Silence fell immediately, a silence only made more absolute by the sound of a distant cannon and by the gurgling of rainwater. This was the word that every member of the garrison most dreaded.

“Ladies and gentlemen, I need not tell you how we are ravaged by this disease in Krishnapur! Many have already departed by way of this terrible illness, no doubt others will follow before our present travail is over. That is the will of God. But it is surely *not* the will of God that a gentleman who has come here to practise medicine...I cannot dignify him with the name of ‘physician’...should send to their doom many poor souls who might, with the proper treatment, recover!”

“Father!” exclaimed Louise in dismay.

Some of the tattered congregation turned their heads to right and left, searching for Dr McNab; others, though merely ragged skeletons these days, were required by their good breeding to remain facing to the front with expressions of indifference. Dr McNab was quickly located, half sitting and half leaning on a stone ledge at the back. The thoughtful look on his face did not change under Dr Dunstaple’s abuse, but he frowned slightly and stood up a little straighter, evidently waiting to hear what else Dr Dunstaple had to say.

“I don’t pretend that medical science has yet found a method of treating cholera that’s quite satisfactory, I don’t say there isn’t room for improvement, ladies and gentlemen...but what I *do* say is that it’s the duty of a member of the medical profession to use the *best available treatment* known and accepted by his fellow physicians! It’s his duty. A licence to practise medicine isn’t a licence to perform whatever hare-brained experiments may come into his head.”

“Dr Dunstaple, please!” protested the Magistrate, who was one of the few cantonment-dwellers who had never experienced any affection for Dr Dunstaple. “I must ask you to withdraw these abusive remarks which are clearly aimed at your colleague. Whatever the rights and wrongs of the matter medically speaking you’ve no right at all to impugn the motives of a dedicated member of our community.”

“It’s no time for niceties of etiquette when there are lives at stake, Willoughby. I challenge Dr McNab to justify his so-called remedies which fly in the face of all that’s known about the pathology of this disease.”

“Father!” cried Louise again, and burst into tears.

“I’m perfectly willing to discuss the pathology of cholera with Dr Dunstaple,” said Dr McNab in a mild and gloomy manner, “but I doubt if there’s anything to be gained by doing so publicly and in front of those who may tomorrow become our patients.”

“See! He tries to avoid the issue. Sir, there is everything to be gained from exposing a charlatan.”

The Magistrate’s eye moved from one doctor to the other over the passive rows of tattered skeletons and he forgot for a moment that he was as thin and ragged as they were. What chance was there of this little community, riddled with prejudice and of limited intelligence, being able to discriminate between the strength of one argument and the strength of another? They would inevitably support the man who shouted loudest.

But what better opportunity could there be of examining the fate of those seeds of reason that might be cast on the stony ground of the communal intelligence?"

"Dr Dunstaple, you will hardly make any progress if you continue to abuse Dr McNab in this way. If you insist on a public debate then I suggest you give us your views in a more suitable manner."

"Certainly," said Dr Dunstaple. His face was flushed, his eyes glinting with excitement; he seemed to be having difficulty breathing, too, and he spoke so rapidly that he slurred his words. "But first ladies and gentlemen, you should know that Dr McNab holds the discredited belief that you catch cholera by drinking...more precisely, that in cholera the morbific matter is taken into the alimentary canal causing diarrhoea, that the poison is at the same time reproduced in the intestines and passes out with the discharges, and that by these so-called rice-water' discharges becoming mingled with the drinking-water of others the disease is communicated from one person to another continually multiplying itself as it goes. I think that Dr McNab would not disagree with that."

"I'm grateful to you for such an accurate statement of my beliefs." Could it be that McNab was actually smiling? Probably not, but there had certainly been a tremor at each corner of his mouth.

"Let me now read to you the conclusion of Dr Baly in his *Report on Epidemic Cholera*, drawn up at the desire of the Royal College of Physicians and published in 1854. Dr Baly finds *the only theory satisfactorily supported by evidence* is that 'which regards the cause of cholera as a matter increasing by some process, whether chemical or organic, in impure or damp air'...I repeat, 'in impure or damp air'." Dr Dunstaple paused triumphantly for a moment to allow the significance of this to seep in.

Many supporters of Dr McNab exchanged glances of dismay at the words they had just heard. They had not realized that Dr Dunstaple had the support of the Royal College of Physicians...and felt distinctly aggrieved that they had not been told that such an august body disagreed with their own man. Two or three of Dr McNab's supporters wasted no time in surreptitiously slipping their cards of emergency instructions from their pockets, crossing out the name McNab, and substituting that of his rival, before settling back to watch their new champion in the lists. The Magistrate noted this with satisfaction. How much more easily they were swayed by prestige than by arguments!

Meanwhile Dr Dunstaple was continuing to disprove Dr McNab's drinking-water theories.

"Ladies and gentlemen, the fact that cholera is conveyed in the atmosphere is amply supported by the epidemic in Newcastle in 1853 when it became clear that during the months of September and October an invisible cholera cloud was suspended over the town. Few persons living in Newcastle during this period escaped without suffering some of the symptoms that are inescapably associated with cholera, if not the disease itself. They suffered from pains in the head or indescribable sensations of uneasiness in the bowels. Furthermore, the fact of strangers coming into Newcastle from a distance in perfect health...and not having had any contact with cholera cases...being then suddenly seized with premonitory symptoms, and speedily passing into collapse, *proves* that it was the result of atmospheric infection."

"What a fool! It proves nothing of the sort," thought the Magistrate, stroking his cinnamon whiskers with excitement that bordered on ecstasy.

However, Dr Dunstaple had now adopted a less ranting and more scientific tone which the audience could not help but find impressive. Some of his oldest friends, who for years had been accustomed to seeing him, fat and genial, as the leading light of a pig-sticking expedition, were astonished to hear him now holding forth like a veritable Newton or Faraday and discussing the latest discoveries in medicine as fluently as if they were entries in the Bengal Club Cup or the Planters' Handicap. One or two of his supporters turned to direct malicious glances at Dr McNab, who was still leaning calmly against the ledge and listening attentively to what his prosecutor had to say. Louise, too, had dried her tears. Her father was not doing too badly and perhaps, after all, he might be right about McNab.

"When you inhale the poison of cholera it kills or impairs the functions of the ganglionic nerves which line the air-cells of the lungs...hence, the vital chemistry of the lungs is suspended; neither caloric nor vital electricity is evolved...hence, the coldness which is so typical of cholera. The blood continues to be black and carbonated...the treacly aspect of the blood in cholera is well known...and in due course the heart becomes asphyxiated. This is the true and basic pathology of cholera. The disease is, however, attended by secondary symptoms, the well known purging and vomiting which, because they are so dramatic, have frequently been taken by the inept as indicating the primary seat of the infection...I need hardly add that this is the view held by Dr McNab."

Once again, heads turned in McNab's direction and the Magistrate's sharp eyes were able to detect a number of veiled smiles and smothered chuckles. McNab was frowning now, poor man, and looking worried as well he might with Dr Dunstaple, transformed into Sir Isaac Newton, mounting such an impressive attack. But Dr Dunstaple had now moved on to the treatment.

"What must it consist of? We must think of restoring the animal heat which has been lost and we must consider means of counter-irritating the disease...Hence, a warm bath, perhaps, and a blister to the spine. To relieve the pains in the head we might order leeches to the temples. An accepted method of counter-irritation in cholera is with sinapisms applied to the epigastrium...or, if I must interpret these learned expressions for the benefit of my distinguished colleague, with mustard-plasters to the pit of the stomach..."

There was subdued laughter at this sally. But the Doctor held up his hand genially and added: "As for

medicine, brandy to support the system and pills composed of calomel, half a grain, opium and capsicum, of each one-eighth of a grain, are considered usual. I could continue to talk about this disease indefinitely but to what purpose? I believe I have made my point. Now let Dr McNab justify his curious treatments, or lack of them, if he can."

Dr McNab was silent for such a long time that even those of his supporters who had remained steadfast throughout Dr Dunstaple's persuasive arguments and had not yet crossed his name from their emergency cards, began to fear that perhaps he had nothing to say. It surely could not be that McNab was confounded, utterly at a loss, for surely almost anyone could string a few medical terms together (enough to convince the survivors of Krishnapur if not the Royal College of Physicians) and save face. But still the silence continued. McNab's head was lowered and he seemed to be pondering in a lugubrious sort of way. His lips even moved a little, as if he were giving himself a consultation. At length, with a sigh and in a conversational tone which did not match Dr Dunstaple's oratory for effect, he observed: "Dr Dunstaple is quite wrong to suggest that there is an accepted treatment for cholera. The medical journals still present a variety of possible remedies, many of which sound most desperate and bizarre...missionaries report from China that they have been cured by having needles stuck into their bellies and arms, yet this is not thought too strange to mention...and almost every variety of chemical substance has been proposed at one time or another, all of which is a sure sign that our profession remains baffled by this disease."

"Needles stuck in people's bellies to cure cholera, whatever next!" the audience appeared to be thinking. And the Magistrate, watching like a stoat, could see by the alarm on their faces that they were assigning this treatment to Dr McNab for no other reason than that he had happened to mention it. Here, in a test-tube before his very eyes, ignorance and prejudice were breeding like infusoria.

"In the greater number of epidemic diseases," McNab went on, "the morbid poison appears to enter the blood in some way, and after multiplying during a period of so-called incubation, it affects the whole system. Such is undoubtedly the case in smallpox, measles, scarlet fever and the various kinds of continued fever...but it must be remarked that in these diseases the illness always begins with general symptoms, such as headache, rigors, fever and lassitude...while particular symptoms only appear afterwards. Cholera, on the other hand, begins with an effusion of fluid into the alimentary canal, without any previous illness whatsoever. Indeed, after this fluid has begun to flow away as a copious diarrhoea the patient often feels so little indisposed that he cannot persuade himself that anything serious is the matter."

"Irrelevant!" muttered Dr Dunstaple loudly but McNab paid no attention and continued calmly.

"The symptoms which follow this affection of the alimentary canal are exactly what one would expect. If you analyse the blood of someone with cholera you'll find that the watery fluid effused into the stomach and bowels isn't replaced by absorption. The experiments of Dr O'Shaughnessy and others during the cholera of 1831–2 show that the amount of water in the blood was very much diminished in proportion to the solid constituents, as also were the salts...Well, the basis of my treatment of cholera is quite simply to try to restore the fluid and salts which have been lost from the blood, by injecting solutions of carbonate of soda or phosphate of soda into the blood vessels. Does that sound unreasonable? I don't believe so. At the same time I try to combat the morbid action by using antiseptic agents such as sulphur, hyposulphite of soda, creosote or camphor at the seat of the disease...that's to say, in the alimentary canal..."

"How eminently full of reason!" thought the Magistrate. "It will be too much for them, the dolts!"

"It's often been regretted by physicians that calomel and other medicines aren't absorbed in cholera...but this regret is needless, in my opinion, as they don't need to be absorbed. If calomel is given in cholera it should obviously not be in pills, as Dr Dunstaple suggests, but as a powder for the sake of better diffusion."

To say that the audience had found Dr McNab's discourse dull would not be entirely accurate; they had found it soothing, certainly, and perhaps monotonous. Many of those present had found it hard to pick up the thread of what he was saying and instead had thought with a shiver: "Needles driven into your belly! Good heavens!" But Dr McNab had at least one attentive listener and that was Dr Dunstaple.

"Dr McNab has omitted to mention certain post mortem appearances which refute his view of cholera and support mine," cried Dr Dunstaple waving his arms violently in his excitement and making thrusting gestures as if about to spear a particularly fine pig. "He hasn't mentioned the distended state of the pulmonary arteries and the right cavities of the heart. Nor has he mentioned the breathlessness suffered by the patient after he has inhaled the cholera poison!"

Dr McNab shrugged negligently and said: "These symptoms are obviously the result of the diminished volume of the blood...Its thickened and tarry condition impedes its passage through the pulmonary capillaries and the pulmonary circulation in general. This is also the cause of the coldness found in cholera."

"Pure reason!" barked the Magistrate, unable to contain himself a moment longer.

"Nonsense!" roared Dr Dunstaple and started forward as if he meant to make a physical assault on Dr McNab. He was halted in his tracks, however, by a shout from the Padre.

"Gentlemen! Remember that you are in the presence of the altar. I must ask you to stop this quarrelling instantly, or to continue it in another place." Furious, Dr Dunstaple now seemed on the point of turning on the Padre and mowing the wiry cleric down with his fists, but by this time Louise and Mrs Dunstaple had hastened to his side and now they dragged him away, hushing him desperately.

It was only to be expected that sooner or later the Collector's sense of duty would reassert itself. Sure enough, within a day or two of this regrettable difference of opinion between the two physicians word went round the garrison that he had been seen up and about again. On the first day of his reappearance he contented himself with walking about, avoiding people's eyes, or shovelling at the still melting ramparts like a man with a crime to expiate. But on the following day he had shaved the red stubble from his chin, was wearing a cleaner shirt, and was once more beginning to adopt a stern and overbearing expression. The Magistrate continued to give the orders which regulated the defence of the enclave, but in a subdued tone, as if referring them to the final authority of the Collector, should he wish to exercise it. It was not until the auction, however, on the third day, that it became clear that the roof of the Collector's collapsed will had once more been shored up with the stoutest timbers.

Food within the enclave had become so critically short by now that it was evident to the Magistrate that anything edible must now be used. So many people had died during the siege either from wounds or illness that a considerable quantity of private stores had accumulated. Their distribution could wait no longer. The Magistrate was in a position to order the confiscation of this food for the good of the community, to order that it should be equally divided among the survivors. But the relatives of the dead, when they heard what was afoot, raised a storm of protest and demanded that their rights to the stores should be respected. The Magistrate hesitated, stroking those terrible, radical, flaring whiskers of his...since he had shouted himself hoarse as a young man in 1832 he had been devoted to the radical cause, a supporter of Chartism, of factory reform, and of every other progressive notion which crossed his path. Now at last he had an opportunity to *act*, not merely to argue. Would he dare to grasp this chance and order the abolition of property within the community?

The Magistrate, standing in hesitation on the verandah, was illuminated by a rare shaft of watery sunlight for a moment and his whiskers flared more brilliantly than ever...but then the sun moved on, extinguishing them. He realized now that his belief in people was no longer alive...he no longer loved the poor as a revolutionary must love them. People were stupid. The poor were just as stupid as the rich; he had only contempt for both of them. His interest in humanity now was stone dead, and probably had been for some time. He no longer believed that it was possible to struggle against the cruel forces of capitalist wealth. Nor did he particularly care. He had given up in despair.

"Yes, we'll hold an auction," he muttered. "That's the easiest thing."

At the time appointed for the auction the poor and the thrifty were left to man the ramparts; everyone else crowded into the hall of the Residency which was considered to be the most suitable place for the proceedings. The goods to be sold had been piled up on the stairs where once "the possessions" had been piled; bottles of jam and honey, heaps of hermetically sealed provisions, bottles of wine, cakes of chocolate pliable with the heat, tins of biscuits and even a few mouldy hams had been stacked against the splintered stumps which were all that now remained of the banisters Fleury had found so elegant the first evening he had entered the Residency.

With an effort the Collector removed his eyes from the food and looked at the crowd assembled to bid for it. How starved they looked! Only Rayne, standing on the stairs with his fingers idly drumming on the lid of a tin of Scottish shortbread, still looked as sleek as he had before the siege. Was this because Rayne had been in charge of the Commissariat? Behind Rayne stood his two servants, Ant and Monkey, as thin as their master was fat; their job was to deliver the food to those who bid successfully for it.

But just as the auction was about to begin there was a commotion amongst the knot of gentlemen who had gathered around the foot of the stairs. The stocky figure of Dr Dunstaple was seen thrusting his way towards the stairs. He looked nervous and excited. He said something to Rayne which the Collector could not hear; Rayne shook his head. They argued for a moment and Dr Dunstaple fell back dissatisfied. Using the butt of a pistol as a gavel Rayne began the auction.

The first lot to be put up was a tin of sugar biscuits and a jar of "mendy", a pomade of native origin for dyeing the hair black. Rayne started the bidding at a guinea and after some brisk competition among the gentlemen at the foot of the stairs it was knocked down to one of them for five guineas. Faces in the hall registered distress at this price as it became clear to many of those present that they would be unable to win anything with their limited resources. More tins of biscuits followed, then other foodstuffs. Then came a battle over a fine tooth-comb among the ladies who had lice in their hair; this ended at forty-five shillings amid tears and despair. A ham came next; after some frenzied bidding at the lower prices it climbed to thirteen guineas, then to fourteen where it seemed likely to stay until at the very last moment, a cautious male voice offered fifteen guineas.

"Vokins, what d'you need a ham for?"

Everyone was startled by the sound of the Collector's familiar, commanding tones, particularly Vokins. He mumbled unintelligibly and looked abashed. He had known it would be a mistake.

"And look here, man, how d'you think you're going to pay for it. You haven't a penny to your name."

Again Vokins mumbled. "Speak up, man!"

"It's not for me, sir."

"Then who is it for?"

"It's for Mr Rayne, sir."

All eyes turned towards Rayne, who smiled apologetically and said, yes, that he had asked Vokins to bid on his behalf as he himself would be conducting the auction and it would clearly be difficult for him to put in bids and be auctioneer at the same time.

"Who else has been making bids for Mr Rayne?" A number of gentlemen raised their hands uncertainly and a gasp of surprise went up from the assembly as it became evident that almost all the food had been bought on Rayne's behalf.

"D'you have enough money to pay for all these goods, Mr Rayne?"

"Not at the moment, sir, but I soon will have."

"You intend to sell them again?"

"Most of them, yes...There should be no difficulty...unless, of course," Rayne added with a smile, "the relief comes sooner than expected."

"Mr Rayne, d'you consider it honourable to profit from the distress of your comrades...of the men, women and children with whom you are fighting for your life?"

"It's a question of fortune, Mr Hopkins. One has to make the best of a situation, after all. Besides, everyone else is bidding out of their next pay, just as I am. They can bid against me if they are prepared to risk it."

"Is everyone bidding out of future pay?"

Several gentlemen nodded and someone said: "Nobody has cash, of course. That was the only way to do it."

"Stand down, Mr Rayne."

Rayne shrugged and ceded his place to the Collector. The Collector looked down at the gaunt, upturned faces gathered at the foot of the stairs. They stared back at him with dull eyes. One or two of the men were smiling. The Magistrate was smiling, and so were Mr Rose and Mr Ford, and so were the Schleissner brothers. The smile spread to more and more people, then turned into a laugh. Everyone was laughing; it was a bitter, unpleasant laugh which the Collector recognized as the sound of despair. Hardly any of the men making these rash bids expected to live to pay for them. In their present mood people would think nothing of mortgaging themselves for years ahead in order to acquire some trifling luxury like a jar of brandied peaches or a few leaves of tobacco.

"Listen to me. It may seem to some of you that there's very little hope left for us in Krishnapur. But this is not so. With every passing day our chances of relief improve. D'you think that the Government in Calcutta is prepared to leave us to our fate? Consider the immense resources available to our nation, consider the British soldiers who must now be converging on the mutinous Indian plains from every part of the Empire. Just think! Nearly three months have passed...by now a relieving force may be no more than a day's march away, and yet you're prepared to mortgage away your future lives as if they did not exist! At the very outside, relief can't be more than two weeks away. A mere few days are nothing when we've already survived so much!"

The Collector, surveying the crowd, felt a little hope begin to stir in the hungry and despairing bodies below him. After all, they seemed to be thinking, it was perfectly true, relief should not be much longer in arriving.

"I don't believe that this is the time for us to profit from each other's misery so I hereby cancel all sales of food which have taken place this afternoon. The food will be handed over to the Commissariat and distributed either among the garrison as a whole, or among the sick, depending on its nature. The Commissariat will henceforth be administered by Mr Simmons, and Mr Rayne will take up his duties at the ramparts; his bearers, however, will remain to assist in the Commissariat. Let me say finally, that it's my intention that we should all starve together, or all survive together."

Once again there was silence. People looked at each other in astonishment. Then a man at the back of the hall began to clap, and someone else joined in. Soon the clapping became fierce applause. Such was the enthusiasm that you might have thought that the Collector had just sung an aria.

But hardly had the applause for the Collector died down when two hands reached up and dragged him down the stairs by his braces and into the crowd.

"I expect they're anxious to chair me around the hall," thought the Collector triumphantly. His success had come as a complete surprise to him. However, nobody seemed anxious to chair him round the hall, or anywhere. Indeed, they seemed to have forgotten about him altogether, for the hands which had grasped his braces to drag him off his podium had belonged to Dr Dunstaple. No sooner had he freed the platform of the Collector's superfluous presence than the Doctor sprang into his place and held up his hand for silence. The Collector had already perceived that all was not well with the Doctor. While speaking he had been aware of the Doctor's red, exasperated features grimacing in the first rank at the foot of the stairs; he had seemed nervously excited, anxious, impatient that the auction should be over. "Disgraceful!" he had muttered. "We could all be dead." But now the Doctor had begun to speak.

"Ladies and gentlemen, Dr McNab still hasn't offered any evidence to support his strange methods which amount, it seems, to pumping water into cholera victims. Nor has he provided any evidence to support his belief that cholera is spread in drinking water. Now, ladies and gentlemen, shouldn't we give him his

opportunity?" And Dr Dunstaple laughed, though in a rather chilling manner.

As before in the cellar, all eyes turned to McNab who, once again, happened to be leaning against a wall at the back. On this occasion, however, his calm appeared to have been ruffled by Dr Dunstaple's words and he replied with a note of impatience in his voice: "If any evidence were needed it would be enough to see what happens when a weak saline solution is injected into the veins of a patient in the condition of collapse. His shrunken skin becomes filled out and loses its coldness and pallor. His face assumes a natural look...he's able to sit up and breathe more normally and for a time seems well...My dear Dr Dunstaple, perhaps you could explain to us why, if the symptoms are caused, as you seem to believe, by damage to the lungs or by a poison circulating in the blood and depressing the action of the heart...why it's possible that these symptoms should thus be suspended by an injection of warm water holding a little salt in solution?"

Dr McNab had asked this question with a smile. But the smile only irritated Dr Dunstaple and he bellowed: "Rubbish! Let Dr McNab give his reasons for saying that cholera is spread by the drinking of infected water!" He paused a moment to let his words sink in, and then added: "Perhaps he'll explain away the case, reported *officially* to the Royal College of Physicians, of a dispenser who accidentally swallowed some of the so-called 'rice-water' matter voided by a patient in a state of collapse from cholera... *but who suffered no ill-effects whatsoever* !"

"No, I can't explain that," replied McNab, who had now recovered his composure and was speaking in his usual calm tone. "Any more than I can explain why cholera should have always attacked those of our soldiers who had recently arrived in the Crimea in preference to those who had been there for some time...Or why, as has been suggested, Jews should be immune to cholera, and many other things about this mysterious disease."

Ah, it had been a mistake to mention Jews. The Magistrate could see people thinking: "Jews! Whatever next!"

"How d'you explain its high incidence in places known to be malodorous?"

"It should be obvious that in the crowded habitations of the poor, who live, cook, eat, and sleep in the same apartment and pay little regard to the washing of hands, the evacuations of cholera victims which are almost colourless and without odour can be passed from one person to another. It has often been noted that the disease is rarely contracted by medical, clerical or other visitors who don't eat and drink in the sickroom. And consider how severely the mining districts were affected in each of the epidemics in Britain. The pits are without privies and the excrement of the workmen lies about everywhere so that the hands are liable to be soiled by it. The pitmen remain underground for eight or nine hours at a time and invariably take food down with them into the pits and eat it with unwashed hands and without a knife and fork. The result is that any case of cholera in the pits has an unusually favourable situation in which to spread."

"Gentlemen," interrupted the Collector, "it's clear that the difference between you is a deeply felt and scientific one which none of us here are qualified for adjudicating...To an impartial observer it seems that there's something to be said on either side..." The Collector hesitated. "Let us therefore be content, until the...er...march of science has freed us from doubt, to take precautions against either eventuality. Let us take care, on the advice of Dr Dunstaple, to ventilate our rooms, our clothes and our persons as best we can lest cholera be present in an invisible poisonous miasma. And at the same time let us take care with washing and cleanliness and other precautions to see that we don't ingest the morbid agent in any liquid or solid form. As for the treatment of those unfortunate enough to contract the disease, let them choose whichever approach seems to them the most expressive of reason."

The Collector fell silent, hoping that these words might bring the meeting to an end without leaving too great a schism between the two factions. But Dr Dunstaple's bitterness was too great to be satisfied with this armistice.

"Dr McNab still hasn't granted my request for evidence that cholera is spread by drinking water. Does he expect us to be convinced by his words about the prevalence of cholera in the pits? Ha! He's forgotten to mention, by some slip of the memory, the one fact about the pits which is known to everyone...the impurity of the air breathed by the pitmen! Moreover, I should warn those present of the risks they expose themselves to under McNab's treatment...which is, however, not a treatment at all, but a waste of time. Let him who is prepared, should McNab decide on another experiment, to have needles driven into his stomach, allow himself to be treated by this charlatan. I believe I've done my duty in making this plain."

"I shall also give a warning to those present, to the effect that, in my view, nothing could be worse for the treatment of cholera than the warm baths, mustard-plasters and compresses recommended by Dr Dunstaple, which can only further reduce the water content of the blood...No medicine could be more dangerous in cholera collapse than opium, and calomel in the form of a pill is utterly useless."

"Thank you, Dr McNab," put in the Collector hurriedly, but McNab paid no attention to him.

"As for the evidence that cholera is spread in drinking-water, there is, as Dr Dunstaple should be well aware, a considerable amount of evidence to support this view. I'll mention one small part of it only...evidence collected as a result of the epidemics of 1853 and 1854 by Dr Snow and which concerns the southern districts of London. These districts, with the exception of Greenwich and part of Lewisham and Rotherhithe, are supplied with water by two water companies, one called the Lambeth Company, and the other the Southwark and Vauxhall Company. Throughout the greater part of these districts the supply of water is intimately mixed, the pipes of both companies going down all the streets and into almost all the courts and

alleys. At one time the two water companies were in active competition and any person paying the rates, whether landlord or tenant, could change his water company as easily as his butcher or baker...and although this state of things has long since ceased, and the companies have come to an arrangement so that the people cannot now change their supply, all the same, the result of their earlier competition remains. Here and there one may find a row of houses all having the same supply, but very often two adjacent houses are supplied differently. And there's no difference in the circumstances of the people supplied by the two companies...each company supplies rich and poor alike.

"Now in 1849 both companies supplied virtually the same water...the Lambeth Company got theirs from the Thames close to the Hungerford Bridge; the Southwark and Vauxhall Company got theirs at Battersea-fields. Each kind of water contained the sewage of London and was supplied with very little attempt at purification. In 1849 the cholera epidemic was almost equally severe in the districts supplied by each company.

"Between the epidemic of 1849 and that of 1853 the Lambeth Company removed their works from Hungerford Bridge to Thames Ditton, beyond the influence of the tide and out of reach of London's sewage. During the epidemic of 1854 Dr Snow uncovered the following facts...out of 134 deaths from cholera during the first four weeks, 115 of the fatal cases occurred in houses supplied by the Southwark and Vauxhall Company, only 14 in that of the Lambeth Company's houses, and the remainder in houses that got their water from pump wells or direct from the river. Remember, this was in districts where houses standing next to each other very often had a different water supply."

"Pure reason!" ejaculated the Magistrate. "It will be too much for them. Ha! Ha!" If anything was destined to distract the assembly from an objective consideration of rival arguments it was this strange, almost mad, outburst from the Magistrate. Dr McNab continued, however: "During the epidemic as a whole which lasted ten weeks there were 2,443 deaths in houses supplied by Southwark and Vauxhall as against 313 in those supplied by the Lambeth Company. Admittedly the former supplied twice as many houses as the latter...but if the fatal cases of cholera during the entire epidemic are taken in proportion to the houses supplied, it will be seen that there were 610 deaths out of 10,000 houses supplied by the Southwark and Vauxhall Company, whereas there were only 119 out of 10,000 supplied by the Lambeth Company. I challenge Dr Dunstaple to deny in the face of this evidence that cholera is not spread by drinking water!"

The effect of Dr McNab's arguments was by no means as overwhelming as might be supposed; with the best will in the world and in ideal circumstances it is next to impossible to escape cerebral indigestion as someone quotes comparative figures as fluently as Dr McNab had just been doing. The audience, their minds gone blank, stared craftily at Dr McNab wondering whether this was a conjuring trick in which he took advantage of their stupidity. Very likely it was. The audience, too, was painfully hungry and yet in the presence of food which was not apparently destined for their stomachs; this made them feel weak and peevish. The heat, too, was atrocious; the air in the hall was stagnant and the audience stinking. Every time you took a breath of that foul air you could not help imagining the cholera poison gnawing at your lungs. Even Fleury, who was perfectly conscious of the force of McNab's arguments, nevertheless gave a visceral assent to those of Dr Dunstaple.

What would have happened if Dr Dunstaple had replied to Dr McNab's challenge it is hard to say. He had taken a seat on the stairs while McNab was speaking. As he finished, however, he sprang to his feet, his face working with rage, his complexion tinged with lavender. He opened his mouth to speak but his words were drowned by a volley of musket fire nearby and the crash of a round shot which brought down a shower of plaster on the heads of his audience.

"Stand to arms!" came a cry from outside, and immediately everyone began to disperse in pandemonium (and more than one tin of food was accidentally grabbed up in the confusion). The Doctor was left to wave his arms and shout; he could not be heard above the din. However, he had one final argument, more crushing than any he had yet delivered, and for this he needed no words. From his alpaca coat he whipped a medicine bottle of colourless fluid, flourished it significantly at Dr McNab and drank it all off. What was in the bottle that he had thus publicly drained to the last drop? The Doctor himself did not say. yet it did not require much imagination to see that it could only be one thing: the so-called "rice-water" fluid from a cholera patient, which Dr McNab claimed was so deadly. Against this argument Dr McNab's tiresome statistics could not hope to compete.

27

At first, there had been great enthusiasm over the Collector's decision to suppress the rights of property in the food that was to have been auctioned and to give a share to everybody. But this enthusiasm swiftly evaporated and soon it became difficult to find anyone who was satisfied with it, let alone enthusiastic. A share for everybody would mean less than half a mouthful...and if "everybody" meant natives as well, the amount you received would hardly be worth opening your jaws for. The food in question had, of course, belonged to the dead; but now the living who still possessed their own meagre stores began to fear for their safety. Prices had already quadrupled during the siege; now a frenzy of economic activity took place in which

more than one lady gave a handful of pearls for a bottle of honey or a box of dates. This was regarded by many of the erstwhile "bolting" party as the twilight of reason before the Collector's increasingly communistic inclinations demanded that you give up not only your stores, but perhaps your spare clothes, and, who knows? maybe even your wife as well. Others, conscious that they were eating the equivalent of a diamond brooch or a sapphire pendant, sat down to a last giddy meal, eating before the Collector could get his hands on it, all at once, what they had hoarded for weeks. Exasperated by this foolishness, the Collector told Mr Simmons to distribute the extra food with the rations as quickly as possible.

"The rations?"

"The normal daily rations of the food in the Commissariat." The Collector looked at Mr Simmons as if he were being obtuse.

"There's no food left in the Commissariat...None to speak of, anyway."

The Collector went with Mr Simmons to have a look. What he had said was quite true; there was almost nothing left. There remained a little grain and rice in the Church, but in the vestry there was nothing. So again the rations had to be reduced. Since there was no meat left now, the ration from now on until the supplies were exhausted would consist of one handful of either rice or *dal* and one of flour per person, the men being given a more generous helping than the women and children. The Collector estimated that at this rate they might carry on for another two or three weeks. Then it would all be over.

It was not only food that was running short; the Collector was shocked to see how little powder and shot remained...the mine, the *fougasses*, and the firing of chain shot to clear the foliage had seriously depleted what he had considered an ample provision of powder; if used sparingly it might last for two weeks, but the shot was almost exhausted. Of ready-made balled cartridge there remained only two full boxes and one half full. As for cannon balls, canister, and so forth...The Collector scowled disagreeably.

Towards evening Fleury was leaning against the rampart at the banqueting hall staring dully out over the foliage, occupied in vague thoughts about food and reviewing in his mind various outstanding meals he had eaten in the course of his existence. What a fool he had been to waste so much time being "poetic" and not eating. He uttered a groan of anguish. On the cantonment and river sides of the banqueting hall there had been no firing of chain shot to clear the jungle: this was partly to save powder, partly because the banqueting hall was, anyway, higher than the surrounding land and thus more difficult to surprise; there were also natural clearings to be seen here and there where the ground was too stony for a thick growth. From the edge of one of these clearings Chloë suddenly flushed a sepoy.

Although he had not recognized her immediately Fleury had noticed Chloë a moment earlier as she came trotting into the clearing; since he had last set eyes on her Chloë's golden curls had grown foul and matted and in places mange had already begun to remove them; a cloud of flies followed her and every few yards she stopped to scratch. Abruptly she noticed that a man was hiding in the under-growth and some recollection of the carefree days of her life before the siege must have stirred in her. Instead of taking to her heels, as any sensible pariah dog would have done, she advanced wagging her tail to sniff at him. For a few seconds the sepoy tried discreetly to shoo her away, hoping to be able to continue unobserved his stealthy creeping through the jungle. But Chloë, still under the influence of distant memory, thought that he was playing a game with her and wagged her tail even harder. Infuriated, the sepoy sprang out of his hiding and flourished his sabre with the clear intention of butchering this loathsome *feringhee* dog. Again and again he swiped at Chloë, but she remained convinced that this was a game and every time her friend approached she darted away and went to sit somewhere else in the clearing, her tail brushing the ground frantically.

Fleury urgently pointed out the sepoy to Ram; he had left his own rifle inside the hall. He watched in agony as Ram, with the deliberate movements of long service and old age, tore the cartridge, emptied the powder into the muzzle, and took his ramrod to drive down the rest of the cartridge.

Having finished loading, Ram stopped to scratch the back of his head, which was rather itchy, and then his elbow, which had been bitten by a mosquito some days earlier but which still itched occasionally. All this time Fleury gazed speechless and appalled as the sepoy sped back and forth in the clearing like a trout in a restaurant tank. Ram was now raising his gun as calmly as the waiter who dips his net into the tank...ah, but Ram had paused again, this time to cough and to smooth back his white mustaches which had been somewhat disarranged by the gust of air from his cough...then he took aim at the gliding sepoy, there was a sudden wild foaming and thrashing of water, and the sepoy lay gasping on the turf. A final electric spasm shook his frame, and then he lay still.

Fleury turned away, sickened, for Chloë had wasted no time in bounding forward to eat away the sepoy's face. He told Ram to kill her as well and hurried away to take refuge in the banqueting hall and try to erase from his mind the scene he had just witnessed. Presently, as he sat by himself in a remote corner of the banqueting hall, he noticed on the wall beside him an ascending column of white ants; as they reached the ceiling they spread their wings and slowly drifted down in a delicate living veil. Once they reached the ground they shook their wings violently, until they fell off. Then the white, wingless creatures crawled away.

"How strange it is," mused Fleury, feeling the futility of everything yet at the same time enjoying the feeling, "that these millions of wings, with all their wonderful machinery of nerves and muscles, should be made to serve the purpose of a single flight. How sad it is to behold how little importance life has for nature, these myriads of creatures called into being only to be immediately destroyed." And he sat for a long time in a

melancholy reverie as the ants continued to drift down, thinking of the futility of all endeavour. When at last he came to his senses, rather ashamed of his lapse into sensitivity, the floor around him was thickly carpeted with tiny discarded wings, as if with the residue of his own aerial poetic thoughts.

Fleury had been expecting that Louise would pay him a visit before she retired to bed. While indulging his melancholy thoughts he had taken care to position himself in a nobly pensive attitude, with the candle at his side lending a glistening aureole to his dark profile. But in due course the candle coughed, spat, and went out, and there was no sign of Louise. Later in the evening a rumour spread that Dr Dunstaple had cholera. Harry immediately hurried away to the Residency, very agitated. Fleury would have liked to have gone, too, but both he and Harry could not go at the same time; someone had to stay behind to fight off the sepoys.

A little before midnight Miriam, who had been unable to sleep, came over to see him and tell him the news. Shortly after supper the poor Doctor had been seized with the tell-tale purging and vomiting. For the sake of privacy he had been carried, not to his own ward in the hospital, but to the tiger house next door where Hari and the Prime Minister had been incarcerated. As people bustled around him the Doctor had harangued them frantically with all the strength that was left to him. “It was only water in that medicine bottle I drank from!” he had protested again and again. “On no account let that charlatan near me!”

While his strength was ebbing he had hurriedly given instructions for his treatment to his daughter and the native dispenser from his ward. A hip-bath was dragged into the tiger house and fires built outside to heat water. The unfortunate Doctor had been immersed and then lifted out, as he had instructed, for a blister to be applied to his spine. Dr McNab had come to the door of his ward for a few moments to watch the heating of the bath-water; then with a sigh and a shake of his head he had retired inside again.

By this time poor Dr Dunstaple had voided a great deal of “rice-water” fluid and was seized by perpetual, agonizing cramps. He was delirious, too, and his breathing was laboured. He was clearly sinking fast. Finally, unable to bear it any longer Louise had gone to find Dr McNab. The trouble was this: although the native dispenser had applied Dr Dunstaple’s treatments on numerous occasions under his direction, he was overcome by stage-fright at the prospect of applying them to the Doctor Sahib himself. His hands trembled and he constantly looked to Louise for advice and support. As for Mrs Dunstaple, she was so distraught that she no longer knew what she was doing and had been taken away, given a composing draught surreptitiously obtained from Dr McNab, and put to bed on her shelf in the pantry.

“I can only treat Dr Dunstaple as I would treat any of my patients and I fear that your father would not agree to my methods. But if you want I shall attend him.”

Louise hesitated. Her father was now so sunk in his illness, so delirious, that he was barely conscious.

“Treat him as you think best, Doctor, but please hurry.”

Within a few moments of Dr McNab’s saline injections Dr Dunstaple had begun to revive. Louise was astonished by the sudden improvement; she could feel the warmth returning to her father’s limbs and see his breathing becoming easier every moment. It had been like a miracle. But as Dr Dunstaple’s brain cleared he had demanded to know why there was no mustard-plaster on his stomach. Dr McNab had thoughtfully retired as his patient was regaining consciousness, for fear of irritating him. Meanwhile, Dr Dunstaple was gradually coming to realize that other things were missing. Where were the calomel pills and opium and brandy? Why were there no hot compresses on his limbs? Louise tried to soothe him and persuade him to drink the antiseptic draught which McNab had given her. But he had demanded to know what it was, and finally poor Louise had been obliged to explain what had happened. He had sunk so low that she had been obliged to approach Dr McNab for his help.

“Miserable girl! D’you want to kill me? Bring back the mustard-plasters instantly! Bring brandy and the other medicaments I ordered. Hot compresses and be quick about it or else I’m doomed!”

Such was the Doctor’s rage, so accustomed was Louise to obedience, that she could not prevent herself from hurrying to execute his orders. By this time Harry was there too, saying: “Look here, we don’t want that McNab fellow putting his oar in. Father seems to be treating himself well enough without help from him.”

Alas, soon the Doctor began to sink again. Miriam, unable to endure this harrowing sight a moment longer had fled from the tiger house.

Fleury was beside himself with distress, but more for Louise’s sake than for the Doctor’s (he had privately come to consider his prospective father-in-law as an opionated old fool). He begged Miriam to hurry back and find out how the old man was faring under his own treatment. But no sooner had Miriam gone than Harry suddenly returned looking more cheerful than one might have expected. He told Fleury that his father had once again sunk very low...almost to death’s door. Again McNab had been summoned and again he had insisted on clearing away the mustard-plasters and compresses. Again he had injected a saline solution into the Doctor’s blood vessels. And again, wonderful to relate, the Doctor had made an astonishing recovery.

But hardly had Harry finished imparting this encouraging news when Miriam returned, her face showing deep concern. Harry must go at once to help Louise. Apparently there had been yet another terrible scene when the old Doctor, his wits once more restored by salt and water, had discovered that he had again been disobeyed. Dr McNab, too, had been angry: “Every time I revive him he abuses me! How much longer am I supposed to put up with this?” Dr Dunstaple, in any case, had settled the matter by clearing everyone out of

the tiger house except for the unfortunate dispenser, who was ordered to adhere to the Dunstaple treatment until death, if necessary, and to lock the door against everyone else.

Fleury and Miriam waited in silent depression for further news, but none came. Presently they went out on to the verandah where it was cooler. The sky was sprinkled with stars. Soon the rainy season would be over, Fleury thought, and the sepoys would once again be able to dig mines and to launch concerted attacks. Counter-mining would be impossible given their shortage of powder; at best they might be able to break into the enemy mines and fight it out hand-to-hand. But would they even have the strength to dig counter-mines? It was not an encouraging prospect.

"Listen to the jackals."

Somewhere not far away, surrounded by jungle, Chloë and the sepoy lay side by side and rotted, or were eaten by the specialist animals of the night.

Towards morning they heard that Dr Dunstaple had died, inconclusively, of a heart attack.

The curious thing about Dr Dunstaple's death was that although the harrowing circumstances which had attended it were well known throughout the camp, it was not generally considered that, by dying, the Doctor had lost his argument with McNab. After all, it was maintained, who was to say that the Dunstaple treatment was not just beginning to work each time as McNab began to apply *his* treatment? The Doctor's subsequent relapse might well have been because of Dr McNab's interference. Above all, Dr McNab was discredited by the fact that he had "stuck needles" into Dr Dunstaple. It made little difference that these needles had been for injections and not for some sinister Chinese purpose. Besides, McNab was a Jew. He'd said so himself.

"I never believed such stupidity could exist," the Collector said to McNab, for whom he had come to entertain a great respect.

"Och, they're confused. They'll learn in time."

But still the notion that Dr Dunstaple had been right somehow persisted, independent of thought or reason, as insubstantial as the supposed "invisible cholera cloud" itself which Dr Dunstaple believed had once hung over Newcastle. But McNab continued as he always had, grave and rather lugubrious, knowing that given time, the "cholera cloud" would move on, too, and that his own view would come to be accepted...but this would only happen imperceptibly and not, perhaps, like a cloud passing, but more in the way that sediment settles in a glass of muddy water.

28

At the end of August the rains stopped as suddenly as if taps had been turned off. September was considered by the English community even under normal conditions to be the most unhealthy month of the year; while the hot sun resumed its office of drying out the pools of water which had collected on the sodden earth, fever-bearing mists and miasmas hung everywhere. Clouds of flies and mosquitoes pursued every living creature.

Hardly had the rains stopped when the spectators began to return to the slope above the melon beds, coming in greater numbers than ever before. No doubt this was because the weather was much better, now that September was under way; it was cooler and the spectators could stroll in the sunshine without needing the shade of umbrellas. Some of the wealthier natives brought picnic hampers in the European manner, and their servants would unroll splendid carpets on the green sward; while their banquets were spread out on the carpets they could watch what was going on through telescopes and opera-glasses which they had had the foresight to bring with them...though what they saw, as they swept the ramparts of the Residency and banqueting hall can hardly have looked very impressive to them: just a few ragged, boil-covered skeletons crouching behind mud walls. But they settled down, anyway, with satisfaction amid the bustle of the fairground, like gentlemen returning to their seats in the theatre after the interval. It did not look as if this last act would take very long.

The garrison, too, had taken to watching the spectators through telescopes, above all to see what they were eating. The more weak-willed of the defenders very often spent more time watching the native princes eating their banquets than they did watching the enemy lines. Food had become an obsession with everyone; even the children talked and schemed about it constantly; even the Padre, at this period, could hardly fall asleep without dreaming that ravens were coming to feed him...but alas, no sooner did these winged waiters arrive with nourishment than he would wake up again. But in spite of everything perhaps it was just as well that none of the things they could see...none of the plump fish or chickens being toasted on skewers, none of the creamy breads, chapatis, nan, and parathas, none of the richly bubbling curries and glistening mounds of rice, which the skeletons' scarlet rimmed eyes could see in their lenses and at which they glared for hour after hour...that none of these things were available, for in their starved and debilitated condition it was very likely that a heavy curry would have killed them as dead as a cannon ball.

Desperate remedies were resorted to in the search for food. Any piece of rotten meat that could still be found in the enclave was slipped over an improvised fish hook, attached to a rope and hurled over the parapet in the vain hope of catching a jackal or a pariah dog that might swallow it. Mr Worseley, the engineer, shot a thousand sparrows and made a curry out of them, which all who tasted it proclaimed excellent, but which aroused the Collector's fury because of the waste of powder and shot. The men at the ramparts had often tried in vain to tempt one of the stray artillery bullocks near enough to capture it, but at long last, towards the end of the first week of September, an old horse was captured at the banqueting hall and put to death. The meat was distributed as rations, the head, bones and entrails used for soup, and the hide cut into strips for the children to suck. For a day and a night the feasting on the horse filled everyone in the enclave with a dreadful exultation, but gradually it died down as the garrison came to realize that one horse was hardly enough to stay their hunger for more than a few hours. This meal of horse might be compared to the draught of air that a drowning man who has fought his way to the surface manages to inhale before being whirled down into the depths again. After the besieged had licked the corners of their mouths and sucked their fingers clean one by one, the cold ocean of hunger closed over their heads again with scarcely a ripple to be seen.

On September 10th, which was Louise's birthday, Fleury bartered his gold cufflinks, a silver snuff-box, and a pair of shoes with Rayne in exchange for two lumps of sugar. He ground the sugar into a powder, mixed it with water and with his daily handful of flour, adding a little curry powder to give it a spicy taste: then he grilled the result on a flat stone beside the fire. He also bought a teaspoonful of tea from one of the artillery women for ten pounds, to be paid after the siege was over or, in case of death, by his executors to certain of her relations; to lend substance to this rather nebulous arrangement which at first only seemed to excite the suspicion of the woman selling the tea, Fleury had drawn up an elaborate letter which began impressively: "To Whomsoever May Find This Missive, I, George Fleury, Being Then Deceased," and which seemed to Fleury to give a certain legal solemnity to the transaction. Thus provisioned, he invited Louise to come to the banqueting hall to celebrate her birthday, though in a very quiet way, he assured her; he had not forgotten that she must still be suffering on account of her father, who had only recently taken his last dive down the well in the Residency yard in the wake of so many of his former patients.

Fleury's cakes had not turned out very well; in fact they had dried as hard as the stone they were baked on, and had to be chipped off it with a bayonet. But even so, Louise was so hungry that she stared at them with a fearful concentration, ignoring Fleury's polite conversation as he made the tea. Unfortunately, when the time

came to devour the cakes, she found she had difficulty in eating hers because of its hardness. She tried exchanging it for Fleury's but that was just as hard. The trouble was that Louise, like a number of other members of the garrison, was suffering from scurvy; there had been several cases of partial blindness and of swollen heads, but the most common symptom, and the one which was troubling Louise, was the loosening of teeth. She felt that her teeth would come out altogether if she tried to bite Fleury's cake. Fleury was not sure that his own teeth were very sound either so they decided that the best thing to do was to suck the cakes and perhaps dip them in the tea to soften them. Besides, in one way it was an advantage that they were so hard, because they would last longer. But in spite of their hardness they seemed to vanish in no time. Louise looked at Fleury and felt so vulnerable that presently she began to cry.

"Oh I say, what's the matter?"

But Louise could not tell him. Apart from the fact that she believed her teeth to be on the point of falling out, she had not had her period for several weeks and was afraid that she was barren. She wanted desperately to confide in someone about this, but once again found it impossible to find anyone suitable...her mother was too distraught, her father was dead, and she could not bring herself to mention it to Miriam for fear of provoking some too blunt observations on the mysterious workings of a lady's insides. After a while, however, she forced herself to smile, and dried her eyes on one of Fleury's shirt sleeves that looked fairly clean. She promised herself that she could continue sobbing later on, after she had gone to bed in the billiard room. Sobbing there was so commonplace that nobody noticed any more.

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It had become evident by now that the sepoys were preparing to make a major assault in order to bring about the end of the siege. From the observation post on the Residency roof Mr Ford reported that new contingents of sepoys were streaming into the enemy lines from every direction. It was impossible to be sure whether these were new recruits to the Krishnapur field, perhaps freed from the victorious siege of the *feringhees* somewhere else on the plain, or simply men who had deserted during the rains returning now to finish the job. Among the arriving troops, however, Mr Ford noticed several squadrons of lancers trailing the green flag of Islam; they looked much too well drilled and well equipped to be merely returning deserters. He also noticed several cannons being dragged into the sepoy camp by bullocks from the direction of the bridge of boats.

Mr Ford, as befitted an engineer, possessed a methodical nature; he made a careful scrutiny of the sepoy encampment and noted on an improvised map the location of various groups and regiments; he also came to deduce, by painstakingly observing the arrival and departure of ammunition carts, the position of the main sepoy magazine. This last piece of information was passed on to Harry Dunstaple, whose skill as a gunner was now celebrated throughout the enclave. But Harry was unable to use it. The magazine was out of his range.

On the afternoon of 12 September, a Saturday, Mr Ford sent an urgent message to the Collector...He had become certain by watching the preparations in the sepoy camp that they would make a major assault within the next few hours. The Collector had independently arrived at the same conclusion by watching the slope above the melon beds where the number of spectators was beginning to increase rapidly.

"Is there no way we could hit their magazine? That would give us a few extra days."

"It's just out of range, Mr Hopkins. If we still had horses..."

The Collector smiled wanly. "If we still had horses we could eat them."

Towards evening the Collector gave the order for everyone who could be spared from the ramparts to assemble in the hall, he wanted to say a few words to the garrison.

"I suppose he's going to tell us that gentlemen now abed in England will be sorry that they're not here," remarked the Magistrate, but nobody was amused by this loathsome display of cynicism and the Magistrate was left to chortle grimly by himself, his soul pickled in vinegar.

"We've a lot of work to do tonight," said the Collector when everyone had assembled in the hall. "It's almost certain that the enemy will attack the Residency from the north, very likely at dawn tomorrow. We shall do our best, of course, to hold the Residency against them, but the chances are that we are now too few to be able to do so...For this reason all the wounded, the ladies, and the children must be taken to the banqueting hall tonight, together with water, powder, cloth, and indeed every single object that might come to our assistance. Provided we take enough water with us there's no reason why we shouldn't be able to hold out for a considerable time in the banqueting hall, which is in a far better situation for defence...and let me remind you that with every passing day, relief comes nearer...perhaps as much as twenty miles nearer with every day's march...You must believe me when I tell you that they're out there on the plain somewhere and coming towards us. I know they are. Another week and we are saved.

"There's just one other matter which I mention only to set your minds at rest...We've decided to conserve sufficient powder in the banqueting hall to blow ourselves up if the worst comes to the worst. I think we're all agreed that it's better for us to die honourably together in this way than to risk a worse fate at the hands of the enemy." A tremor went through the Collector's audience at these words. Vokins, in particular, could not see how this announcement was supposed to set his mind at rest. His enthusiasm was in no way aroused by

the prospect of being blown up honourably with the ladies and gents. Indeed, the more he thought about it, the less appetite he found he had for it. Still, he thought with a shudder, perhaps it was better than falling into the hands of those Negroes out there!

When he had finished speaking the Collector hesitated for a moment on the stairs, looking down at the tired and gaunt faces below him. Earlier he had heard that a young clerk from the Post Office had shot himself while lying in bed...he had left a young widow, to whom he had been married in Calcutta during the previous cold season; this act of despair had moved him more than any other of the many deaths he had witnessed since the beginning of the siege; it was perhaps the fact that the young man had been lying in bed when he had shot himself that the Collector found so sad. Such hopelessness! It was terrifying. "It was my fault. I should have been able to give him something to hope for," he thought with a sigh, as he descended the half dozen stairs and went to kneel beside Miriam on the stone flags.

"The Lord our God is one Lord: them that serve other gods, God shall judge."

"Lord have mercy upon us," muttered the congregation of skeletons.

"Idolaters and all them that worship God's creatures, God shall judge."

"Amen. Lord have mercy upon us."

"The Lord's day is holy; them that profane it, God shall judge."

The Collectors lips moved but his mind had already wandered away, besieged by practical questions...how would they manage for privies with so many people in the banqueting hall, assuming that they were driven out of the Residency? Would there be enough water? He must try and have a moment alone with each of his children before tomorrow morning. It was his duty. Besides, he might have no other chance to tell them that he loved them; Miriam, too. He had grown fond of her in the last few days. He would have liked to have put a hand on her shoulder now to comfort her. But even as this thought entered his mind the Padre's voice came promptly to reprimand him: "Adulterers and fornicators and all unclean persons, God shall judge."

"Amen. Lord have mercy upon us," said the Collector heavily, making it sound more like a command than a supplication. But would it not have been better, he mused, to have left the banqueting hall and defended the Residency where there was a well? No, not so...he had taken the right decision. The Residency was vulnerable. Even if shot to pieces the commanding position of the banqueting hall would still make it defensible. And how were the sepoys faring? They must know by now whether a relief force was coming near. Perhaps that was why they were determined to attack now without further delay? What a shame it all is, even so! What a waste of all the good work that has been done in India! Still, there must be some way of destroying their magazine.

"Covetous persons and extortioners and them that grind the faces of the poor, God shall judge."

"Amen. Lord have mercy upon us, and lay not these sins to our charge."

The Padre had asked the Collector if he might preach a sermon. The Collector had agreed provided that it was brief, for there remained so much to be done before morning. As text the Padre had chosen: "I see that all things come to an end, but thy commandment is exceeding broad." The Padre had become very weak since the end of the rains. His face had grown so thin that as he spoke you could plainly see the elaborate machinery of his jaw setting to work with all its strings, sockets and pulleys. Those at the back of the gathering now had to ask each other in whispers what the text had been, for they had been unable to hear it.

Once again the Padre urged his listeners to repent because now the most dangerous time of all was at hand, and he repeated the words he had read earlier: "His fan is in his hand, and he will purge his floor, and gather his wheat into the barn; but he will burn the chaff with unquenchable fire." He urged the garrison to trust in God, and referred to David and Goliath, to Israel triumphing over that mighty host by the seashore, to Daniel in the den of lions. Then he fell silent for a little while, as if in meditation.

When he next spoke it was to ask the forgiveness of anyone present whom he had unwittingly wronged during his ministry in Krishnapur. Then, having asked the congregation to pray for him, he paused again...and this time it was evident that it was physical weakness that obliged him to rest. Once he had recovered a little strength he ended his address with a quotation from Archbishop Leighton: "'How small a commotion, small in its beginning, may prove the overturning of the greatest kingdom! But the believer is heir to a kingdom that cannot be shaken...He who trusts in God looks death out of countenance; and over him the second death shall have no power,..."'

The gathering dispersed. The Collector went upstairs for his pistols. One of these, the Colt Patent Repeating Pistol, he had been in the habit of using throughout the siege and it was now stuck uncomfortably in the cummerbund he wore round his waist; he was anxious that the others should not fall into the hands of the sepoys if the Residency were lost. They lay in a glass case in his dressing-room, displayed, like Turtons' file, on a cushion of faded red velvet with the shadow of a pistol in darker red where until recently the Colt had been. This case of pistols was the last and longest-surviving of the Collector's many treasures from the Exhibition, and really, he thought, with the possible exception of the velocipede which had inspired the trace of fortifications, the only one to have been of any use; most of the others, of course, were now immovably set in the dried mud ramparts and could only have been recovered with a pick. The Collector selected just two more of these pistols, a small and reliable five-barrelled pistol by Lefaucheux of Paris, which he wanted to load and give to Miriam, and the English revolving pistol by Adams, which had caused such a stir at Woolwich by its lightness and by the rapidity with which it could be loaded and fired (up to ten times a minute had been claimed for it). The rest of the pistols he bundled into a towel and gave to one of his daughters to carry to the

banqueting hall.

Before going down to the northern ramparts where the brunt of the attack was expected to fall, he took a last look round the room and saw Hari's phrenology book lying on the floor. He picked it up and opened it at random. It opened at " *Hope*." "This organ is situated on each side of that of *Veneration*, and extends under part of the frontal and part of the parietal bones. It inspires with gay, fascinating, and delightful emotions, painting futurity as fair and smiling as the regions of primeval bliss. When too energetic and predominant, it disposes to *Credulity*, and in mercantile men, leads to rash and inconsiderate speculation. When the organ is very deficient, and that of *Cautiousness* large, a gloomy despondency is apt to invade the mind."

Chuckling, the Collector went downstairs. On his way he spotted a large black beetle on the stairs; he caught it between finger and thumb and took it out with him to the ramparts. There he generously offered it to the Magistrate, who was busy carrying cartridges to the firing-step. The Magistrate hesitated.

"No thanks," he said, though with a note of envy in his voice.

The Collector popped it into his mouth, let himself savour the sensation of it wriggling on his tongue for a moment, then crunched it with as much pleasure as if it had been a chocolate truffle.

30

Just before dawn the sound of a voice singing came over the darkened expanse of what had once been the Residency compound from the direction of what had once been the Cutcherry. It was a beautiful sound. It had a strange and thrilling resonance, as if the singer were standing in a large room or a courtyard built of stone in one of the ancient palaces left by the Mogul emperors further to the west. But, of course, there was no palace, nor even a large room, unless the Cutcherry cellar had somehow survived. It could only be some quality in the stillness of the air which made the voice carry so beautifully. Fleury asked Ram what the song was.

"It is the name of God, Sahib," said Ram respectfully. As the old pensioner listened to the song, which was now accompanied by the ringing of bells, Fleury saw an expression of tender devotion come over his lined face, and he, too, thought, as the Collector had thought some weeks earlier in the tiger house, what a lot of Indian life was unavailable to the Englishman who came equipped with his own religion and habits. But of course, this was no time to start worrying about that sort of thing.

Instead, Fleury looked to his armament, which was impressive; it included a sabre, unbearably sharp, a couple of wavybladed daggers from Malaya, and another, Indian, dagger like one of those that Hari had shown him, with two blades and a handle for the whole fist, like that of a hand-saw. Lastly he had picked an immense, fifteen-barrelled pistol out of the pile rejected by the Collector. This pistol was so heavy that he could not, of course, stick it in his belt; it was all he could do to lift it with both hands. But he had been so enthusiastic about it that he had willingly gone through the laborious loading of its honeycomb of barrels, one after another, and now it was ready to wreak destruction. He already saw fifteen sepoys stretched on the ground and himself standing over them with this weapon smoking in his hand...or rather, in both hands.

As the sky slowly brightened and they waited, Fleury thought of how he and Harry had waited for the first attack of all at the beginning of June. How long ago that seemed! He remembered how innocently they had discussed which natives they would blow to smithereens and which they would grant a reprieve to. Now they were too weak to discuss anything.

In spite of his physical weakness Harry was busy. The balustrade beside him looked like the shelves of a hosiery shop: dozens of pairs of silk stockings hung from it or lay in piles on the flagstones beside the brass six-pounder. If you had lifted the dresses of the Krishnapur ladies on that morning of the last assault, you would have found them correspondingly bare-legged, for it was they who had donated their stockings to help solve Harry's difficulty with his brass cannon...Because, incredible though it may seem, he had fired so many round shot in the course of the siege that the muzzle had been hammered into an ellipse. Such was the distortion that the muzzle would no longer accept round shot; nor would it have accepted canister had not Harry had the idea of tapping the canisters and using silk stockings to contain the iron balls. Beside the brass six-pounder there stood another six-pounder, this one of iron with a longer chase. This cannon, too, had been fired a great deal and although its muzzle had shown no distortion Harry had an uneasy feeling that it might soon be about to burst.

The Collector had gone up to join Ford on the roof because he wanted to be in a position from which he could give the order to retreat at the right moment; in his own mind there was no doubt but that he would have to give it sooner or later. But the cannons on the north-facing ramparts had an essential function if the garrison was to survive the morning; these cannons must break the impetus of the first enemy attack. It was now just light enough on the roof for him to see to load his pistols. He sat cross-legged in the native fashion beside the parapet and listened to the flag stirring restlessly in the light airs above him. Scowling with concentration he began to load the six chambers of his Colt Patent Repeating Pistol with the lead which dragged down one pocket of his scarecrow's morning coat. One by one he filled each chamber with powder and then, without wadding or patch, placed a soft lead ball on its mouth and pulled the long lever beneath the barrel; this lever moved the rammer which forced the lead down into the chamber and sealed it so completely, the Collector had been assured that the powder would still fire even if you immersed your arm completely in

water. When he had finished, and the Adams, too, had been loaded, the Collector settled down calmly to wait for the attack. He felt very weak, however, and every so often he retched convulsively, though without vomiting for he had consumed nothing except a little water in the past twenty-four hours. He was inclined to feel giddy, too, and was obliged to support himself against the parapet in order to steady his troubled vision.

The Collector had expected that the attack would begin with the howling warcry he had come to dread, but for once it did not; out of the thin ground mist that lingered in a slight dip in between the churchyard wall and the ruins of the Cutcherry the shapes of men began to appear. Then he heard, faintly but distinctly, the jingle of a bridle. He stood up shakily, then shouted: “Stand to! Prepare to fire!” From the roof his voice echoed over the sleeping plain like that of the muezzin. When they heard it the sepoys threw back their heads and uttered a howl so piercing, so harrowing that every window in the Residency must have dissolved if they had not been already broken. With that, bayonets glistening, they began to charge, converging from every angle of the hemisphere; before they had advanced a dozen yards squadrons of lancers had overtaken them racing for the ramparts.

The Collector waited until he estimated their distance at two hundred yards and shouted: “Fire!” This was at the limit of the effective range of canister but he could afford to wait no longer; his men were so weak, their movements so sluggish that they would need every extra second if they were to re-load and fire another charge before the enemy reached the ramparts. As half a dozen cannons flashed simultaneously at the ramparts, gaps appeared in the ranks of charging men and horses thrashed to the ground...But the Collector could see that he had given the order to fire too soon. Not enough damage had been done...It was like watching leaves floating on a swiftly flowing river; every now and then one of the leaves would be arrested against a submerged rock while the great mass of them flowed by even faster on each side. And he could see that the distance was in any case too short: his cannons would never be able to re-load in time. He ought to have waited to fire one really effective salvo at close range. The enemy *sowars* were already on top of the ramparts.

“Spike the guns!” he shouted, but no one could possibly have heard him. Half the men were already straggling back into the Residency building or into the hospital in order to form a new position while the remainder did their best to hold off the sepoys who were already swarming over the ramparts. Some of the sepoys were shot or cut down as they struggled to get over “the possessions” which stuck out jaggedly here and there; a *sowar* pitched headless from his horse on to a silted-up velvet chaise longue; a warrior from Oudh dived head first in a glittering shower through a case of tropical birds while a comrade at his elbow died spreadeagled on the mud-frozen wheels of the gorse bruiser. But this did not delay the charge for more than an instant. More sepoys poured forward over the bodies of their fellows and a number of the defenders who had lingered too long hammering nails into the vents of the cannons were cut down as they tried to make their way back to the shelter of the buildings; many more would have perished had not a small rescuing party which included Rayne, Fleury, half a dozen Sikhs and a couple of Eurasian clerks, wielding sabres and bayonets, surged forward in a sudden counter-attack to surround their companions and drag them back. Fleury, of course, had no business being there at all, but Harry had sent him to the Residency with a message and while passing by he had found the defence so desperately hard pressed that he had forgotten all about Harry. Now he was whirling his sabre in a novel manner, invented by himself to give optimum performance in hand-to-hand combat, and which suggested the sails of a windmill. He had discovered, however, that it was very exhausting but at the same time, once started, felt that it would be unwise to stop, even for a moment. For the moment the sepoys, perplexed by his behaviour, were keeping well out of his way until they could think of some way of dealing with him.

“Get under cover!” yelled the Collector from the roof, not that anyone could possibly hear him. He and Ford had a cannon on the roof loaded with everything that they had been able to lay their hands on: stones, penknives, pieces of lightning-conductor, chains, nails, the embossed silver cutlery from the dining-room, and even some ivory false teeth, picked up by Ford who had seen them gleaming in the undergrowth; but the greater part of the improvised canister was filled with fragments of marble chipped from “The Spirit of Science Conquers Ignorance and Prejudice”. Naturally they were anxious to fire this destructive load before it was too late; the angle of the chase was depressed to such an extent that they were afraid that in spite of the wadding the contents of their canister might dribble out...already a fountain of glass marbles commandeered from the children had cascaded about the ears of the defenders.

By this time the last of the garrison had fought their way back into the buildings and were trying to defend doors and windows against a swarm of sepoys. The Collector nodded to Ford who was standing by with the portfire. Ford touched it to the vent. There was a flash and a deep roar, followed by utter silence...a silence so profound that the Collector was convinced that he could hear two parakeets quarrelling in a tamarind fifty yards away. He peered over the parapet. Below nothing was moving, but there appeared to be a carpet of dead bodies. But then he realized that many of these bodies were indeed moving, but not very much. A sepoy here was trying to remove a silver fork from one of his lungs, another had received a piece of lightning-conductor in his kidneys. A sepoy with a green turban had had his spine shattered by “The Spirit of Science”; others had been struck down by teaspoons, by fish-knives, by marbles; an unfortunate *subadar* had been plucked from this world by the silver sugar-tongs embedded in his brain. A heart-breaking wail now rose from those who had not been killed outright.

"How terrible!" said the Collector to Ford. "I mean, I had no idea that anything like that would happen."

But Ford's only reply was to clutch his ribs and stagger towards the parapet. He had toppled over before the Collector had time to catch his heels.

But already a fresh wave of sepoys was pouring over the ramparts and bounding forward to the attack over that rubbery carpet of bodies. The Collector knew it was time he hurried downstairs...he had expected that something like this would happen, but not so quickly. He had not reckoned with the fact that the second charge of canister could not be fired. Just as he was leaving the roof there was a crack which stung his eardrums and the flagpole, struck near the base by a round shot, came down on top of him dealing him a painful blow on the shoulder. He found himself struggling on his back with the stifling presence of the flag wrapped round him like a shroud; the strange thing was that as he weakly continued to struggle (for the staff lay across his legs, pinning him down, and the lanyards had somehow trussed his elbows to his sides), he recognized the sensation immediately: this was a nightmare he had had on the night they had taken refuge in the Residency, and repeatedly since then throughout the siege; when the Collector, cursing, had at last fought his way out of the flag, it was such a relief to escape from his nightmare that he felt he did not mind so much about the sepoys.

Downstairs, the Sikhs, the Magistrate, Rayne, a couple of young ensigns, and a motley collection of indigo planters and Eurasians, were engaged in a desperate fight to keep the sepoys out of the building; but already they were being driven back from doors and windows. The Collector had fortunately laid a plan to meet this contingency. He had ordered the men at the north-facing ramparts and at the churchyard wall to fight their way back through the Residency from room to room towards the hall, from where a dash could be made for the head of the connecting-trench; once safely inside the trench the north-facing cannons of the banqueting hall, firing over their heads, could give them covering fire to complete their withdrawal. But it was essential that the various rooms of the Residency through which they were retreating should be defended and relinquished in concert, so that they should not find themselves outflanked. So the Collector had arranged that the giant Sikh, Hookum Singh, should be at his side in the most central part of the Residency ready to wield the Church bell which had been toppled from its tower earlier in the siege and which only he was strong enough to lift. Beside the door of each room a supply of ready-loaded firearms had been laid; every available weapon from the Enfield rifles of those killed earlier in the siege to native flintlocks and the countless sporting guns which had been such a feature of "the possessions", had been pressed into service. It was the Collector's hope that thus even a few men would be able to keep up a heavy fire.

The Residency itself would be lost: the Collector had never been in doubt about that. The important question was *how* it was lost...for, at all costs, the momentum of the attack must be broken. He had come to think of the attack as a living creature which derived its nourishment from the speed of its progress. Delay it, and its vitality would ebb. Halt it for a few minutes and it would die altogether. Until now its speed had been so great that it had grown into a ravening monster, capable not only of swallowing the Residency, but of gulping down the banqueting hall as well.

The Collector had posted all the men he could spare on the upper, north-facing verandah. From this vantage point they were to keep up a steady rifle fire on the sepoys advancing over the open ground until they heard the first ringing of the Church bell. In addition they had two camel guns, small cannons which could be mounted on saddles and fired from the backs of camels; for the circumstances these had been mounted on the back of a plush sofa which had been recovered from the rampart where it had served during the rains. Fleury, unaware of the Collector's plans for a graduated retreat because he was not supposed to be in the Residency anyway, had dashed upstairs carrying the fifteen-barrelled pistol with which he was hoping to do battle from the upper storeys. In the first room he looked into, the window space had already been commandeered by two native pensioners and an indigo planter; in the next room he was just in time to see the camel guns fired...the sofa recoiled on its protesting castors and the men serving the guns set to work to re-load. He hurried down the corridor to the music-room. That should do fine. As he entered, he heard the pealing of a bell reverberating through the building above the din of battle, and he paused a moment, wondering what on earth it could be. But never mind...no time to worry about things like that. He hefted the pistol towards the window, laid it on the sill, cocked it, put a percussion cap beneath the hammer, directed it at some sepoys trotting below, and pulled the trigger, confident that a sepoy would throw up his arms and sink to the ground. There was a crack, but no sepoy dropped dead; the percussion cap had fired but not the pistol. Fleury uttered a curse and started to examine it, for the life of him he could not see what was the matter. Soon he was absorbed in the workings of the pistol, which was designed according to principles that were new to him. He would not be surprised to find that by using his intelligence he could add one or two significant improvements to this design. Again the great bell rang out. What on earth could it be? The next time it rang he was so absorbed in the problem of getting the pistol to work that he did not notice it; nor the next time either. Or the one after that.

Downstairs, the Collector was becoming desperate. He had just heard the banqueting hall cannons fire, which must mean that the sepoys were attempting an attack from the flank; he hoped that their attack had not succeeded because he and his men had more than they could cope with already. It was not that his plan of fighting from room to room was not working...on the contrary, it was working to perfection: every room they retired from was crammed with dead and dying sepoys. The only trouble was this: the sepoys kept on bravely

coming forward, while he and his men kept on retreating. Against such an onslaught there was nothing much else he could do. They had fought their way backwards through pantries and brushing-rooms and knife rooms, past the European servants' staircase, past the European butler's room, the nurseries, the nursery dining-room, and the *ayah's* rooms, until in the dining-room he knew he would have to make a stand. But the dining-room was too spacious: there the sepoys could use their numbers for a devastating bayonet charge. So, once again, he had to give the signal to Hookum Singh. The giant Sikh's muscles bunched, the veins stood out on his throat and temples, his eyes bulged, and somehow he heaved the great iron bell into the air and swung it back and forth three times, making the walls sing and tremble, before silencing it again on the pulsing floor. Then he dragged it away to the drawing-room. The door into the drawing-room must be defended, no matter what happened...Otherwise, so quick had been the retreat through the Residency, the men fighting their way back from the hospital and across the yard would find themselves outflanked and unable to reach the connecting trench. So the Collector and Hookum Singh and half a dozen others prepared themselves to defend the drawing-room door, if necessary with bayonets as well as firearms.

Upstairs, Fleury had taken the pistol to pieces (as far as it could be taken to pieces which did not seem to be very far) and put it together again. He did not believe himself to be any the wiser as regards the reason for it not firing, but he thought he might as well try again.

"I say, you don't happen to know how this blessed thing works, do you?" he asked the person who had just come into the music-room. But he did not wait for a reply before throwing himself to one side as a sabre whistled down and buried itself deep in the brickwork of the window-sill where he had been sitting. Somehow a burly sepoy had found his way into the music-room; this man's only ambition appeared to be to cut Fleury in pieces. Luckily, the blade of the sabre had snapped off and remained embedded in the wall, giving Fleury time to aim the pistol and pull the trigger. But this time there was only a disappointing click; not even the percussion cap fired. Never mind, Fleury had plenty of other weapons. He was now trying to drag one of the wavy-bladed Malayan daggers out of his belt, which was actually a cummerbund; he was having difficulty, though, because the corrugated edges had got caught in his shirt. Well, forget about his dagger, where was his sabre? His sabre, unfortunately, was on the other side of the sepoy (it was a good thing he had not noticed it because it was so sharp that he would have been able to slice Fleury in two without even pressing). Fleury had no time to draw his final weapon, the two-bladed Indian dagger, for his adversary, it turned out, was no less impressively armed than he was himself and he was already flourishing a spare sabre which he had been carrying for just such an emergency.

In desperation Fleury leapt for the chandelier, with the intention of swinging on it and kicking the sepoy in the face. But the chandelier declined to bear his weight and instead of swinging, he merely sat down heavily on the floor in a hail of diamonds and plaster. But as the sepoy lunged forward to put an end to the struggle he stumbled, blinded by the dust and plaster from the ceiling, and fetched up choking on the floor beside Fleury. Fleury again rolled away, tugging at first one dagger, then the other. But both of them refused to yield. His opponent was clumsily getting to his feet as Fleury snatched a violin from a rack of worm-eaten instruments (the survivors of an attempt by the Collector to start a symphony orchestra in the cantonment), snapped it over his knee and leapt on to the sepoy's back, at the same time whipping the violin strings tightly round the sepoy's neck and dragging on them like reins.

The sepoy was a large and powerful man, Fleury had been weakened by the siege; the sepoy had led a hard life of physical combat, Fleury had led the life of a poet, cultivating his sensibilities rather than his muscles and grappling only with sonnets and suchlike...But Fleury knew that his life depended on not being shaken off and so he clung on with all his might, his legs gripping the sepoy's waist as tight as a corset, his hands dragging on the two broken pieces of violin. The sepoy staggered off, clutching at the violin strings, out of the music room and down the corridor with Fleury still on his back. He tried to batter his rider against the wall, scrape him off against a fragment of the banisters, but still Fleury held on. They galloped up and down the corridor, blundering into walls and against doors, but still Fleury held on. The man's face had turned black, his eyes were bulging, and at last he crashed to the ground, with such force that he almost shook Fleury off...but Fleury remained dragging on the violin until he was certain the sepoy was dead. Then he returned, quaking, to the music-room to collect his sabre. But he was shaking so badly that he had to sit down and have a rest. "Thank heaven for that violin," he thought. "Still, I'd better not stay long with the sepoys attacking..." He thought he had better leave the pistol where it was; it was much too heavy to carry around if it was not going to work. He had scarcely made this decision when he looked up. The sepoy was standing there again.

Was he a spectre returning to haunt Fleury? No, unfortunately he was not. The sepoy was no phantasm...on the contrary, he looked more consistent than ever. He even had red welts around his throat where the violin strings had been choking him. Moreover, he was chuckling and making humorous observations to Fleury in Hindustani, his eyes gleaming as black as anthracite, pointing at his neck occasionally and shaking his head, as if over an unusually successful jest. Fleury made a dash for his sabre, but the sepoy was much nearer to it and picked it up, making as if to hand it to Fleury, and chuckling more loudly than ever. Fleury faltered backwards as the sepoy advanced, still making as if to offer him the sabre. Fleury tripped over something and sat down on the floor while the sepoy worked his shoulders a little to loosen himself up for a swipe. Fleury thought of jumping out of the window, but it was too high...besides, a thousand sepoys were waiting below. The object he had tripped over was the pistol; it was so heavy that it was all he could do to raise it. But when

he pulled the trigger, it fired. Indeed, not just one barrel fired, but all fifteen; they were not supposed to, but that was what happened. He found himself confronted now by a midriff and a pair of legs; the wall behind the legs was draped in scarlet. The top half of the sepoy had vanished. So it seemed to Fleury in his excitement, anyway.

The Collector and half a dozen Sikhs were still managing to hold the door into the drawing-room, but only just. They had first closed the door itself, but within seconds it was bristling like a porcupine with glittering bayonets...within a few more seconds it had been hacked and splintered to pieces by these bayonets, and now it no longer existed. But while it was being chopped down the Collector and his men had emptied their guns into the hacking sepoys, and the door had become tightly jammed with the dead, many of whom still had bayonets wedged in their lifeless hands. Behind them their live comrades were shoving to force the pile of bodies through into the drawing-room to free the doorway; meanwhile the Collector and the Sikhs were shoving with all their might to hold the bodies in place, although their efforts were hindered by the protruding bayonets. The Collector and Hookum Singh had their backs to this wall of flesh, with bayonets sprouting from between their legs and under their armpits; they were shoving and shoving, and they in turn were being shoved by the other Sikhs, who were struggling to keep them in place. But inch by inch they were being driven back. The Collector found he could hardly breathe in the middle of this appalling sandwich; a few inches from his nose the face of a dead sepoy grinned at him with sparkling teeth; the Collector had the odd sensation that the man's eyes were watching his efforts with amusement. He turned his own eyes away and tried not to think about it. But he was still so close that he could smell the perfume of patchouli on the corpse's mustache.

Slowly but surely the mass of bodies was yielding...soon it would be forced out into the drawing-room like the cork out of a bottle of champagne. When they could hold it no longer the Collector shouted the order to retire to the next door: that which led from the drawing-room to the hall and where, several weeks earlier, the Collector had been lurking as he tried to make up his mind to attend the meeting of the Krishnapur Poetry Society. Behind that door would be yet another stack of loaded firearms ready to deal with the next assault. All this time Mr Rayne on one side of the staircase and Mr Worseley on the other, each with half a dozen men, should have been fighting their way back to converge with his own party in the hall. For a few moments, to give Hookum Singh time to get to the hall and ring the bell for the last time, the Collector held the toppling pile of bodies by himself, then he sped across the drawing-room after the Sikhs, his boots crunching broken glass from the cases of stuffed animals; the Sikhs had bare feet, however, and did not crunch it so loudly. Together they barely had time to take up a position at the far door, seize a loaded gun, drop to one knee, and aim as, with a final heave, the bulging mass of bodies exploded into the room, followed by the living.

"Fire!" shouted the Collector, and another morbid volley took effect. "Front rank, bayonets. Second rank, change guns, prepare to fire!"

Again there was a sharp skirmish at the door. Soon the bodies began to pile up here, too, and yet again the Collector and his men had to put their shoulders to the carnal barricade to prevent it from being ejected into the hall; and yet again, as if in a dream, the Collector found his face an inch from that of an amused sepoy and thought: "It surely can't be the same man!" for from this corpse's mustache there was also a scent of patchouli. But the Collector had no time to worry about the locomotion of corpses; this doorway had to be held until the defenders on the other side of the staircase had made good their retreat. A barricade of flagstones prised up from the floor had been erected for a final stand and the Collector, snatching a moment to look back towards it, was dismayed to see that the other party was already behind it, thus leaving himself and his men exposed on the flank. He bellowed at the Sikhs to retreat and as they stumbled back under a cross-fire from the other side of the hall, two of them fell dead and another mortally wounded. Once again there was a flurry of bodies from the doorway they had been defending and another charge. It was now time for the Collector to play his last card.

All this time he had been keeping a reserve force waiting in the library. This "veteran assault force" (as he called it) was composed of the only men left from the cantonment community whom he had not yet made use of, the few elderly gentlemen who had managed to survive the rigours of the siege. Their joints were swollen with rheumatism, their eyes were dimmed with years, to a man they were short of breath and their hands trembled; one old gentleman believed himself to be again taking part in the French wars, another that he was encamped before Sebastopol. But never mind, though their blue-veined old hands might be trembling their fingers could still pull a trigger. It was this force which the Collector now threw into the engagement, though he had to shout the order more than once as their leader, Judge Adams, was rather deaf. From the library they staggered forth with a querulous shout of "Yah, Boney!" Shotguns and sporting rifles went off in their hands. The hall chandelier crashed to the ground and shot sprayed in every direction. For a moment, until the old men had been dragged back to the barricade, all was chaos. The veteran assault force had not been a success.

Again the Collector heard the crash of cannons from the banqueting hall. If they were to escape back through the trench they would have to move quickly; any moment now the sepoys would have crossed the yard from the hospital and outflanked them. At this moment, as if to give substance to the Collector's fears, the Magistrate and two planters came running back along the outside of the Residency wall from the direction of the hospital.

"Where are the others?"

"Dead."

"Get back to the banqueting hall with the old men." The Collector had an unpleasant feeling that unless something unexpected happened he and the Sikhs would find themselves cut off...But just then something did happen.

Ever since Ford had pointed out the location of the sepoy magazine Harry had been unable to get it out of his mind. He had even fired a round shot in its direction with the long iron six-pounder at the normal maximum elevation, that is to say, five degrees; the brass six-pounder, of course, no longer consented to swallow round shot. The shot, as he had expected, had fallen short by somewhere between three and four hundred yards.

The difficulty was this: he wanted to increase the elevation to creep forward over those last 300 yards (he did not dare exceed the two-pound charge) but, as every gunner knows, increasing the elevation beyond five degrees can be a risky business; it is not the great number of rounds that destroys a cannon but the high elevation at which it is fired. A gun which at any elevation from point blank to five degrees could stand two hundred rounds without a strain, at thirty degrees would almost certainly burst before fifty rounds had been fired. And this iron six-pounder had already fired heaven only knew how many rounds before coming into Harry's hands at the banqueting hall. But when Fleury came back at last and told him how they were faring in the Residency, Harry knew he would have to take the risk.

The banqueting hall was now filled with ladies and children, refugees from the Residency. Before dawn Harry had set them to work collecting up any combustible material they could find; pieces of shattered furniture, empty ammunition cases, even books. Then, assisted by Ram and Mohammed, he had built a crude furnace of bricks on the verandah in which to heat up the shot. Now his heart was thumping as he turned the elevating screw past five degrees. Until he reached five degrees he had found that it turned easily, through long use...but now it became stiff and awkward. Yet Harry continued to turn.

When at last he was satisfied with the elevation he supervised the loading; a dry wad over the cartridge and then a damp one. Then he ordered Ram to serve out the reddest shot he could find in the furnace, watched it loaded and, motioning the pensioners back, himself took the portfire and touched it to the vent. There was a crash. The cannon did not burst. A small, glowing disc swam calmly through the clear morning air trailing sparks. It climbed steeply for some moments and then hung, apparently motionless, like a miniature sun above the sepoy encampment. It dipped swiftly then towards the magazine and smashed through the flimsy, improvised roof. The flash that followed seemed to come not just from the magazine itself but from the whole width of the horizon. The trees on every side of the magazine bent away from it and were stripped of their leaves. A moment later the men who watched it explode from the verandah felt their ragged clothes being to flap and flutter in the blast. The noise that came with it was heard fifty miles away.

The Collector did not know how the magazine had been blown up but he did not stop to wonder. While the sepoys hesitated, afraid that they were being attacked in the rear, he and the few surviving Sikhs made a dash for the trench and safety.

31

On 17 September, a Thursday, at about ten o'clock in the morning, the Collector found himself in conversation with the Padre. The Collector sat on an oak throne which had been chipped out of the mud rampart for fuel, but had not yet been used, though it had lost one of its front legs. The throne, whose gothic spires rose high above the Collector's head, had been placed on a wooden dais at one end of the banqueting hall. Because of the missing front leg, the Collector had to sit well back and to one side; even so, he sometimes forgot about it and, waving an arm for emphasis, narrowly avoided plunging to the floor; this could have caused him a severe injury since the floor was some way below. The Collector had sat a good deal in this chair over the past few days and it had come to affect his habits of thought. He had found that since the chair discouraged emphasis, it also discouraged strong convictions. It had once even gone so far as to empty him on to the floor for voicing an intolerant opinion on the Jesuits. So now he was gradually coming to see that there were several sides to every question.

For the moment, however, the Collector's mind was idly considering the question of food. It was on just such a dais as this above the feudal retainers, he supposed, that the Saxon thanes would have sat down to trenchers of roasted wild duck and suckling pig. He was numbed by the thought of this imaginary food and could hardly keep his mind on what the Padre was saying. What was it? Oh yes, he was recanting on the Exhibition which, for some reason he had taken to calling "The World's Vanity Fair"

It was true. A terrible knowledge had been swelling slowly in the Padre's mind, like a sweet, poisonous fruit, which for a long time he had not dared to taste. He had committed a grave error in lending his approval, together with that of the Church he represented, to the Exhibition. The Collector had shown such enthusiasm for its hollow wonders that he himself had been tempted and misled; he had allowed his own small stirrings of doubt, which he recognized now to have been stirrings of conscience, to be smothered. Besides, there had been so much in the Exhibition that might be clearly seen as innocuous, if not actually beneficial to God's cause. The Floating Church for Seamen was not the only example...there were inventions that might also serve

God: the pews for the use of the deaf, for example, which could be connected to the pulpit with gutta-percha pipes.

The Padre was very weak now, and could only move from place to place if someone helped him. But he knew that he had one more duty to perform before he allowed himself to succumb to his craving for rest. He must persuade the Collector of his error and make him realize that his veneration for this Vanity Fair of materialism was misplaced. But the Collector refused to pay attention for very long. He would murmur: "Hm, I see, I see," with a distant look in his eye, as if he were hardly listening. Then he would stride away.

This striding away would not have mattered if the Padre had been able to keep up with him...but the Padre could not move unaided. Sometimes he would have to wait for an hour or more before he could find someone to carry him to the Collector's side. Then, likely as not, he would hardly have had a chance to open his mouth before the Collector would be off again. But the Padre did not give up easily. Besides, the banqueting hall was small and the Collector could not get far. Sometimes, nevertheless, he had to muzzle his temper. He had to muzzle it now, for example, as the Collector suddenly bounded out of his three-legged chair and away. It had taken so long...it had taken two young ensigns, a native pensioner and a Eurasian clerk to lift him up to this platform, and now he would have to get himself down again! What increased his anger (which the chemistry of his soul swiftly transmuted into love for the Collector) was the fact that no able-bodied person seemed to be looking in his direction. He might remain up here indefinitely without anyone noticing his feeble signals!

As it happened, the Collector would not have minded agreeing with the Padre about the Exhibition. He had come to entertain serious doubts about it himself. He, too, suffered from an occasional enlightening vision which came to him from the dim past and which he must have suppressed at the time...The extraordinary array of chains and fetters, manacles and shackles exhibited by Birmingham for export to America's slave states, for instance...Why had he not thought more about such exhibits? Well, he had never pretended that science and industry were good *in themselves*, of course...they still had to be used correctly. All the same, he should have thought a great deal more about what lay behind the exhibits. Feelings, the Collector now suspected, were just as important as ideas, though young Fleury no longer appeared to think so for he had given up talking of civilization as a "beneficial disease"; he had discovered the manly pleasures to be found in inventing things, in making things work, in getting results, in cause and effect. In short, he had identified himself at last with the spirit of the times. "All our actions and intentions are futile unless animated by warmth of feeling. Without love everything is a desert. Even Justice, Science, and Respectability." The Collector was careful to embrace this conviction in a moderate manner, lest he be tipped out of the chair in which he was no longer sitting.

He had nothing left now from the Exhibition. He had thrown his pistols away since he had no more soft lead balls to use in them. He sighed regretfully as he picked his way slowly through the tattered refugees camped here and there on the floor, wondering what had become of his Louis XVI table. Beauty, of course, and Art, also needed warmth of feeling, there was no getting away from it...and, in passing, he allowed himself to feel a cautious contempt for the greedy merchants of England for whom the Exhibition had been an apotheosis.

The Collector's eye came to rest on the corner where Miriam lay; she was too weak to help Dr McNab now, but although she could no longer be of any service to the ailing figures who lay nearby, she had refused to let the Collector move her mattress up to the dais where the air was better and where cholera clouds would be less likely to hang (if such things existed, which of course they had been proved not to by Dr McNab, but all the same...). Not that the air was very bad anywhere now since most of the roof had been removed by round shot and considerable holes had been made in the walls. At night, indeed, it became quite chilly and a fire had to be built in the centre of the hall. It was Louise who usually attended to Miriam, bringing her a ration of water and helping her nearer the fire at night. The Collector's chivalry was aroused by Miriam's weakness, for the heart of a gentleman still beat beneath his ragged morning-coat; besides, he found her an attractive young woman in spite of everything, for she could still smile as sweetly as ever. "Can I do anything for you?" he asked her, thinking absently: "She has a mind of her own."

"I'm perfectly alright. You must consider your other responsibilities," said Miriam, proving it yet again. She smiled, rejecting his chivalry.

"Ah, duty!" sighed the Collector. "Mind you, where would we be without it?"

Of all the ladies who had survived both shot and cholera (for the dreaded disease had taken its toll of the billiard room as of other parts of the garrison) none now displayed greater fortitude than Louise. Although she had come to dislike Dr McNab, believing him to have been indirectly responsible for her father's death, she remained constantly at his side, helping him to care for the sick and wounded. From this pale and anaemic-looking girl who had once thought only of turning the heads of young officers, and whom the Collector had considered insipid, he now saw a young woman of inflexible willpower emerging. He watched her as he passed the section of the hall reserved for the sick, the wounded, and the dying. Her cotton dress was rent almost from the armpit to the hem and as she leaned forward to bring a saucer of water to the lips of a wounded man, the Collector glimpsed three polished ribs and the shrunken globe of her breast; modesty was one of the many considerations which no longer troubled her. She stood up, mopping her brow with the back of a skeleton wrist. The Collector moved on, walking unsteadily. He went out for a few moments and stood on the steps between the Greek pillars, looking in the direction of the Residency for any sign of movement. But

he could see none. These pillars, he could not help noticing, were dreadfully pocked and tattered by shot. He thought contemptuously: “So they weren’t marble after all.” He lingered for a moment sneering at the guilty red core that was revealed beneath the stucco of lime and sand. He hated pretence. But then, with a shrug, he went back inside: this was hardly the time for sneering at pillars.

At the far end of the hall a great pile of earth was growing steadily; here the Sikhs were trying to dig a well. They had run out of water the day before. In spite of their weariness and thirst they declined to drink the water which the Europeans had been using and which was stored in half a dozen hip-baths brought over from the Residency a week earlier (only one of which still contained any water). The Magistrate, nowadays a mere heap of bones decked with cinnamon whiskers, had summoned a little energy with which to pour scorn on the “death by superstition” which faced the brave Sikhs. The Sikhs, ignoring him, had been digging steadily for hours; now they were beginning to shovel up wet earth. The Collector sat on his heels by the edge of the pit and watched for a few minutes before continuing on his way.

Outside on the verandah the sun was shining with the crisp brilliance of the Indian winter. What a lovely day it was! In spite of everything the Collector felt his spirits lift as he sat down beside Lucy on a sheltered corner of the verandah and watched her making cartridges. Mingled with the brimstone smell of burned powder he fancied that he could smell the perfume of roses from the Residency garden, pruned this year by musket fire. Then the smell of warm grass came to join that of the roses and gunpowder and he fell asleep for a few moments, dreaming of cricket fields and meadows. When he awoke Lucy was still at his side and the position of the sun had hardly changed.

For the first three or four days after the Residency had been abandoned a number of the ladies had been employed in making cartridges; now, because of the shortage of lead for the moulds, the job had been left to Lucy, who had become extraordinarily skilful. She sat cross-legged, like a native in the bazaar, surrounded by her implements...the knife and the straight edge for cutting the cartridge paper, the wooden mandrels for rolling the paper into shape, the powder flask, the two-and-a-half dram tin measures for measuring out the powder...and finally, alas, the pot of grease, the cause of all the trouble. Lucy’s grease, however, was a mixture of beeswax and rancid butter. A Hindu could have eaten a pound of it with pleasure.

The Collector watched with admiration as Lucy’s deft fingers dipped a cartridge up to the shoulder in the grease and then set it neatly in a row with the others she had made. At intervals the defenders would come from one part or another of the ramparts to collect a supply of them; but for the moment the firing was slack. The sepoys must be well aware that the garrison’s ammunition was all but finished. They could tell by what was being fired at them. They knew that in another day or two they would not even have to charge the ramparts; they would merely have to step over them and kill off the garrison as they pleased. But of course, by then the garrison would have blown itself up.

The Collector, in a remote and academic sort of way, was musing on this question of ammunition, considering whether there was anything left which still might be fired. But surely they had thought of everything. All the metal was gone, first the round objects, then the others. Now they were on to stones. Without a doubt the most effective missiles in this matter of improvised ammunition had been the heads of his electrometal figures, removed from their bodies with the help of Turtons’ indispensable file. And of the heads, perhaps not surprisingly, the most effective of all had been Shakespeare’s; it had scythed its way through a whole astonished platoon of sepoys advancing in single file through the jungle. The Collector suspected that the Bard’s success in this respect might have a great deal to do with the ballistic advantages stemming from his baldness. The head of Keats, for example, wildly festooned with metal locks which it had proved impossible to file smooth had flown very erratically indeed, killing only a fat money-lender and a camel standing at some distance from the field of action.

A few other metal objects had been fired, such as clocks and hair brushes...but they had proved quite useless. Candlesticks filed into pieces and collected in ladies’ stockings had served for canister for a while, but had been swiftly exhausted. Then a find had been made. Poor Father O’Hara had contracted cholera and died shortly after the withdrawal to the banqueting hall; when his body had been heaved over the ramparts for the jackals and pariah dogs (the only way that remained for disposing of the dead), a number of heavy metal beads, crosses, Saints and Virgins had been discovered in his effects. The Padre, consulted as to the propriety of firing them at the enemy, had given his opinion that they could perfectly well be fired and that they, or any other such popish or Tractarian objects, would very likely wreak terrible havoc. However, this did not seem to have been the case, particularly, except for the metal beads.

There was a small explosion at the ramparts several yards away, but it was nothing to worry about...only Harry trying to free the long, iron six-pounder in which the head of a French cynic, Voltaire, had become jammed...rather surprisingly, the Collector thought, a narrow, lozenge-shaped head like that; Harry had been unable to ram the head home to the cartridge and so, according to normal procedure, was obliged to destroy the charge by pouring water down the vent; followed by a small quantity of powder, also through the vent, to blow out his makeshift shot. Harry had worked as tirelessly as his sister for the last few days; now he sank down on to a stool beside his cannon out of sheer weakness, and began to weep at the thought of the wasted powder and the wasted water resulting from this misfortune. However, he had successfully blown Voltaire’s head out of the bore of the six-pounder; it rolled over the rampart and landed among the skeletons, scattering the pariah dogs who were sunning themselves there while waiting for their next meal to be heaved over.

“The sepoys are very quiet,” the Collector called to Harry conversationally to stop him weeping, because now Lucy was starting and he was afraid that she would spoil the powder by dropping tears into the flask.

“D’you think they’re going to attack?”

“I expect so.” Harry dried his eyes on a piece of wadding, annoyed with himself.

“There’s one thing...the spectators have got tired of waiting, anyway.”

The melon beds had been virtually deserted for the last two or three days. Only a lonely rajah or two was to be seen now, solitary figures surrounded by servants, watching through elaborate brass telescopes acquired at one or other of the European stores in Calcutta. At night there were no longer any bonfires to be seen, either on the hill or way out on the surrounding plain.

The Collector heard shuffling and heavy breathing and knew, though the breathing was not the Padre’s, that the Padre was nevertheless approaching. He could have told this without turning to look; but he did turn, because he did not want to give the Padre the impression that he was avoiding him. The Padre was strung limply between the shoulders of a young ensign and of an ancient pensioner, both of whom looked ill, worn out, and exasperated. They laid the Padre down at the Collector’s side as instructed and arranged his limbs in a suitable position of repose.

“There was something I forgot to mention to you earlier,” said the Padre, who did not normally favour such a blunt approach but felt that given the state of his health there might not be any time to lose...This time he was determined to go as straight as an arrow aimed at Saint Sebastian to the core of the problem, as he saw it.

“I’m referring to a leading article which appeared in *The Times* concerning the Exhibition and which I should like to read you (by a fortunate chance I happen to have it on my person). It goes as follows: ‘So man is approaching a more complete fulfilment of that great and sacred mission which he has to perform in this world. His image being created in the image of God, he has to discover the laws by which the Almighty governs His creation; and, by making these laws his standard of action, to conquer nature to his use, himself a divine instrument.’ Hm, I wonder did you hear that, Mr Hopkins, or should I read it again?”

“Thank you, Padre. I heard it perfectly and found it most interesting.”

“It seems to me, Mr Hopkins, that the doctrine of this passage has no foundation whatsoever in the word of God. If we turn to the history of man’s creation in the sacred volume, we find that his mission was simply to dress and keep the garden of Eden and to serve and obey his Creator...and that, so far from having any mission to pry into the laws by which the Almighty governs His creation, he was expressly forbidden to do so. The only forbidden tree in the garden was the tree of science and intellect. It is a remarkable fact, Mr Hopkins, that the argument used by the serpent to seduce Eve from her allegiance to her Creator is almost precisely that used by the Editor of *The Times* : ‘Ye shall be as GODS, knowing good and evil’...that is, as wise as God Himself!”

The Collector’s mind had wandered yet again, though he nodded intelligently from time to time, hoping thus to soothe the Padre. But his concentration was poor these days: he could hardly keep his mind on anything for more than a moment...and even when he heard what the Padre said it made no sense...“the Editor of *The Times* as wise as God Himself!” Really, what rubbish. As the Padre’s feeble voice continued to denounce the Editor of *The Times* the Collector lifted his eyes to the sky where, as always, the kites and vultures were circling.

The Collector was fond of vultures and did not share the usual view of them as sinister and ominous creatures. By their diligent eating of carcases they had probably spared the garrison an epidemic or a pestilence, but that was not what the Collector liked about them...though clumsy on the ground, their flight was extraordinarily graceful. They climbed higher than any other birds, it seemed; they ascended into the limitless blue until they became lost to sight or mere specks, drifting round and round in a free flight in which their wings scarcely seemed to move. They more resembled fish than birds, gliding in gentle circles in a clear pool of infinite depth. The Collector would have liked to watch them all day. Their flight absorbed him completely. He thought of nothing while he watched them, he shed his own worries and experienced their freedom, no longer bound by his own dull, weak body.

He was obliged to return to earth, however, by signs of excitement at the ramparts, which doubtless heralded another attack...and by the Padre who had asked him a question and was waiting with signs of impatience for his reply.

“Well...” said the Collector cautiously, “of course it’s a matter of opinion...” He had not heard the question but hoped that this reply would serve. The excitement was increasing and he looked anxiously towards the rampart, afraid that the attack might develop before he even saw what was happening. Alas, the Padre was evidently not satisfied. A look of despair, of righteous anger came over his face. Suddenly, to the Collector’s astonishment, the Padre gripped him by the throat and shouted: “A matter of opinion! The Crystal Palace was built in the form of a *cathedral* ! A cathedral of Beelzebub!”

“I say,” said a voice a little distance away. “We’ve come to relieve you.”

“A cathedral of Baal! A cathedral of Mammon!” The Collector, trying to prise the Padre’s fingers from his throat and at the same time turn his head, was just able to see a pink young face with a blonde mustache surmounting a brilliant scarlet tunic. This man was peering winningly over the rampart.

“I say, d’you mind if we come in? We’ve come to relieve you.”

The young man who had peered over the rampart to see this extraordinary collection of scarecrows was known to more than one of the garrison of Krishnapur, for he was none other than that Lieutenant Stapleton who had danced so often with Louise in Calcutta the previous cold season and who had been given a lock of blonde curls as a keepsake; he had made a point of wearing this lock of hair next to the rather wispy blonde hair that grew on his own chest. Louise had hardly been out of his thoughts for a moment during the past six weeks while the relieving force, under the command of General Sinclair, had been advancing circumspectly over the plains. It had not seemed possible to him that the fair creature could still be alive, for messages from native sources had indicated that Krishnapur had been invested since the beginning of June. And if she were dead, what had happened to her before dying did not bear thinking about (though he did think about it, all the same).

The men of the relieving force, which was a large one, handsomely equipped with field batteries, were not surprised to find Krishnapur deserted as they advanced in the direction of the iron bridge. The "pandies" usually decamped. As they marched through the empty streets, however, a little old man put himself in front of the marching column and led the way, beating a kettle-drum and pronouncing the restoration of the *Company Bahadur*.

When they reached the sepoy lines it was pretty obvious that the mutineers had been there not long before; fires were still burning and private belongings lay scattered about. From the sepoy lines they could see that the Residency had been abandoned, but a tattered Union Jack still flew over the banqueting hall. They were not too late! Lieutenant Stapleton asked the General, who was his uncle, if he might ride over first, and the General obligingly agreed.

As he trotted his horse forward over the intervening space Lieutenant Stapleton noticed two giant white faces smiling at him with understanding and compassion. There was something about those faces, however, that made him uneasy and coming nearer he saw that they had been terribly pocked by round shot and musket fire, as if by a disfiguring disease. On the outside of the rampart there was an astonishing collection of white skeletons which he tried not to look at but which rattled unpleasantly as the jackals took to their heels at his approach. He could not help wondering why a rousing cheer had not gone up as soon as the garrison had spotted his red uniform. He understood it a little better when he saw what a state the survivors were in. They stared at him as you might stare at orange rats trying to get into bed with you. Lieutenant Stapleton suddenly realized with a shock of fear that he was lucky not to have been shot down by one of these tattered lunatics.

Gradually, though, as the rest of the column led by his uncle on a fine white horse arrived, the survivors who could walk came out of the banqueting hall and allowed themselves to be greeted by the relieving troops. The General could see that the garrison were having trouble adjusting themselves to the new state of things and so, to give them time, he called for iced sherry and soda to be served. The poor devils looked as though they could do with some refreshment. On second thoughts he also sent one of his aides to fetch blankets as well, for some of the ladies did not seem to be very decently attired and, although they did not look very enticing, he still did not want them to give his men ideas. He had never seen Englishmen get themselves into such a state before; they looked more like untouchables.

Lieutenant Stapleton had managed to recognize Louise without too much trouble, though her appearance had given him a bit of a surprise. It was when he went to embrace her, murmuring: "Don't worry, my dear, you're safe now," that he got a really severe shock...for she stank. Then, as he was trying to think of something to say to her (all the speeches he had prepared had somehow been predicated on the fact that, although in distress, she would be lovely, well dressed, and as sweet-smelling as he remembered her), an emaciated individual in a green jacket pushed his way rudely between them. This rude fellow in the green jacket had an advantage over Lieutenant Stapleton...he seemed able to get closer to Louise without discomfort than he could himself, no doubt because he stank worse than she did. The three young people stood in a rather hostile and malodorous silence waiting for something to happen. Lieutenant Stapleton was very conscious of the thick cloud of flies that buzzed round each of his companions.

"Well, we've relieved you, eh?" said the General to the Collector, trying to break the ice. "Nick of time, what." This Collector-wallah was a devilishly hard fellow to talk to, he was finding. He'd heard stories about him in Calcutta and half expected something of the sort. Mind you, he'd probably been through a sticky time. "Now, where's that sherry pawnee?"

Lucy, all this time, was still sitting on the verandah surrounded by her cartridge-making tools and weeping bitterly as she looked at the neat rows of cartridges she had made and which were no longer needed. She dried her eyes presently because she realized that the Magistrate was watching her from not far away. The Magistrate often watched her. He approached her now and sat beside her, saying: "Well, the relief has arrived after all." A rent in her dress, oddly similar in position though not as severe as the one in Louise's, permitted him to see her breasts which, sadly deflated by hunger, were no longer like plump carp (they were more like plaice or Dover sole). The Magistrate put a companionable hand on her shoulder and then, after a moment's hesitation, slipped it on to the back of her neck. Perhaps Lucy would have melted weakly into his bony arms had not an expression of dismay and incredulity come over his face. She promptly slapped him as hard as she could, which was not very hard. She did not know what the matter was but knew instinctively that this was the right thing to do. And it was just as well that she did so because Harry appeared at that moment, to lead

her out for sherry and soda. “How dare he, that despicable atheist!” cried Harry, both indignant with the Magistrate and gratified by Lucy’s response. The Magistrate, mortified, had made himself scarce.

The Padre had wasted no time in equipping himself with fresh and healthy bearers and now had himself carried with exhilarating swiftness in a litter to where the Collector was standing with the General.

“Think of the American vacuum coffin guaranteed to preserve corpses from decomposing! Was that not against the word of God who decreed: ‘Dust unto dust?’ Think of the countless statues of unclothed young women. Think of the male statues which are even now being exposed at Sydenham without adequate covering and which may be viewed by innocent girls!”

The Collector sighed but said nothing. The General also could find no comment, but eyed the Padre nervously.

Quite suddenly, after they had refreshed themselves, the members of the garrison began to talk; soon they were babbling away garrulously to their deliverers, laughing, cheering and even singing. The General beamed; things were going much better now. But then, one by one, they began to topple over like skittles, and in no time the green, shot-scarred turf was littered with unconscious figures. The General shouted for litter-bearers and retired to his tent in a bad mood for a bath and a change of clothes. Even when allowances were made, the “heroes of Krishnapur”, as he did not doubt they would soon be called, were a pretty rum lot. And he would have to pose for hours, holding a sword and perched on a trestle or wooden horse while some artist-wallah depicted “The Relief of Krishnapur”! He must remember to insist on being in the foreground, however; then it would not be so bad. With luck this wretched selection of “heroes” would be given the soft pedal...an indistinct crowd of corpses and a few grateful faces, cannons and prancing horses would be best.

32

Crossing for the last time that stretch of dusty plain which lay between Krishnapur and the railhead, the Collector experienced more strongly than ever before the vastness of India; he realized then, because of the widening perspective, what a small affair the siege of Krishnapur had been, how unimportant, how devoid of significance. As they crept slowly forward over the plain his eyes searched for those tiny villages made of mud with their bamboo groves and their ponds; and though the plain was perfectly flat the villages were somehow hidden in its folds, blending with it. When they paused near one of these villages to rest the horses the Collector remained in the carriage and watched the men drawing water from the well, drawing it up in a huge leather bag with the help of their bullocks, and he knew that the same two men and two bullocks would do this every day until the end of their lives. And this was the last impression the Collector had of India. When he thought of India in later years he would always see these two men and two bullocks and the leather bag flooding out its water as it settled on the ground.

There is nothing much more to be said about the siege of Krishnapur. It is surprising how quickly the survivors returned to the civilized life they had been living before. Only sometimes in dreams the terrible days of the siege, which were like the dark foundation of the civilized life they had returned to, would return years later to visit them: then they would awake, terrified and sweating, to find themselves in white starched linen, in a comfortable bed, in peaceful England. And all would be well.

It may be said that, although he survived it, the siege nevertheless had a bad effect on the Collector. When he returned to England from Calcutta, which he did as soon as he was well enough to travel, he did not take up the glorious and interesting life that was waiting for him there, as one would have expected. Instead, he resigned from Fine Arts committees, and antiquarian societies, and societies for reclaiming beggars and prostitutes; nor did his interest in crop rotation appear to have survived the siege. He took to pacing the streets of London, very often in the poorer areas, in all weathers, alone, seldom speaking to anyone but staring, staring as if he had never seen a poor person in his life before. As he grew older, however, he gave up walking and seldom stirred from his club in St James; there he could be seen reading newspapers, endlessly, indiscriminately, about great events and small in the order they appeared on the page. But he was never heard to say what he thought (if, indeed, he thought anything at all) about this vast amount of random detail he must have accumulated in his later years. He took to eating and drinking too much also, that most gentle of all the sins. He grew very portly as an old man and although by this time he had become something of a legend to the other members of his club (“The Hero of Krishnapur”), one might have thought that he himself had entirely forgotten about the siege.

But one day, in the late seventies, he and Fleury happened to come face to face in Pall Mall and, after a moment, succeeded in recognizing each other. Fleury, too, had grown stout and perhaps rather opinionated; he and Louise had a number of children whom Fleury was inclined to hector with his views, showing extreme displeasure if they disagreed with him. The two men fell into step together; the old gentleman’s pace, however, was a little too slow for Fleury who kept having to master an impulse to stride on firmly, as was his custom. Conversation was more difficult than one might have expected. They exchanged some fragments of personal news. Fleury told the Collector that his brother-in-law, General Dunstaple, who had married Miss Hughes that was, still lived in India and was currently, according to their most recent mail, shooting tigers in Nepal. His own sister, Miriam, the Collector probably did not know, had subsequently married Dr McNab and

they, too, had remained in India.

"Ah yes, McNab," said the Collector thoughtfully. "He was the best of us all. The only one who knew what he was doing." He smiled, thinking of the invisible cholera cloud, and after a moment he added: "I was fond of your sister. I don't suppose I shall see her again."

Half anxious to be on his way, for he had an appointment with a young lady of passionate disposition, Fleury asked the Collector about his collection of sculpture and paintings. The Collector said that he had sold them long ago.

"Culture is a sham," he said simply. "It's a cosmetic painted on life by rich people to conceal its ugliness."

Fleury was taken aback by this remark. He himself had a large collection of artistic objects of which he was very proud.

"There, Mr Hopkins, I cannot agree with you," he declared loudly. "No, culture gives us an idea of a higher life to which we aspire. And *ideas*, too, are a part of culture...No one can say that ideas are a sham. Our progress depends on them...Think of their power. Ideas make us what we are. Our society is based on ideas..."

"Oh, ideas..." said the Collector dismissively.

But now Fleury really *had* to go. The old fellow walked so slowly and he himself was late already. And so Fleury raised his hat, shook hands, and hurried away. He was glad to have met the Collector again, but he had the uncomfortable feeling of many things left unsaid. Well, never mind...nobody has time to settle everything.

The years go by and the Collector undoubtedly felt, as many of us feel, that one uses up so many options, so much energy, simply in trying to find out what life is all about. And as for being able to do anything about it, well...It is hard to tell what he was thinking during this last conversation with Fleury when he said: "Oh, ideas..." After all, McNab had been right, had he not? The invisible cholera cloud had moved on. Perhaps he was thinking again of those two men and two bullocks drawing water from the well every day of their lives. Perhaps, by the very end of his life, in 1880, he had come to believe that a people, a nation, does not create itself according to its own best ideas, but is shaped by other forces, of which it has little knowledge.

Afterword

The reality of the Indian Mutiny constantly defies imagination. Those familiar with the history of the time will recognize countless details in this novel of actual events taken from the mass of diaries, letters and memoirs written by eyewitnesses, in some cases with the words of the witness only slightly modified; certain of my characters also had their beginnings in this material. Among the writers whom I have cannibalized in this way are Maria Germon and the Rev. H. S. Polehampton of Lucknow, F. C. Scherer, and the admirable Mark Thornhill who was the Collector at Muttra at the time of the Mutiny. The verses admired by Mr Hopkins at the meeting of the Krishnapur Poetry Society are taken from an epic poem by Samuel Warren Esq celebrating the Great Exhibition, a work which had a great success in its day, though dismissed by one reviewer as “the ravings of a madman in the Crystal Palace”.

Lastly, I am most grateful to Mrs Anthony Storr for letting me see family letters relating to the Mutiny. I wish also to acknowledge my debt to Professor Owen Chadwick’s work on the Victorian Church and to M. A. Crowther’s *Religious Controversy of the Mid-Nineteenth Century*, and to the historians, too numerous to mention individually, on whom I have relied for the facts of Victorian life to support my fiction.

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The Singapore Grip

J.G. Farrell

Introduction by Derek Mahon

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Introduction

Jim Farrell, the finest novelist of recent times, drowned in Bantry Bay on Saturday 11 August 1979, at the age of forty-four. Two days later eighteen more lives were lost when gale-force winds broke up the Fastnet Race; but Jim wasn't sailing, he was fishing. He had bought a house near Kilcrohane, County Cork, only five months before and turned into the complete angler in a matter of weeks. Though born in England, he spent much of his youth in Ireland and returned constantly in his thoughts. Like Brendan Archer in *Troubles* he had left the love of his life here and never quite severed the umbilical cord.

He traveled a great deal, latterly in India and Southeast Asia to research *The Siege of Krishnapur* and *The Singapore Grip*—though his research was singular in that he drafted the novels first and made his field trips afterward to confirm or revise the background he had read up or imagined at home in London. He traveled in time too, of course, and his evocation of the Raj at the time of the Indian Mutiny must be one of the best there is. One of the remarkable things about the work is his uncanny sense of period, his eye for the clinching detail —an elephant's-foot wastepaper basket in *Troubles*, or the contents of Prince Hari's room in *The Siege:*

> Near a fireplace of marble inlaid with garnets, lapis lazuli and agate, the Maharajah's son sat on a chair constructed entirely of antlers, eating a boiled egg and reading *Blackwood's Magazine.* Beside the chair a large cushion on the floor still bore the impression of where he had been sitting a moment earlier. He preferred squatting on the floor to the discomfort of chairs but feared that his English visitors might regard this as backward.

Out of context this reads, I realize, rather like a racist joke; but Jim was no racist. On the contrary, he is one of the few English (or Anglo-Irish) writers about the British Empire who can see events through the eyes of the colonized, certainly in *The Siege* and the *Grip*, where the submerged life of the Chinese community is explored sympathetically. The exception, curiously, is *Troubles*, where everything is seen through the eyes, or binoculars, of the Big House characters; and although the "native Irish" are treated affectionately, they remain oddly baffling to the narrator, as to his protagonist:

> The Major raised the binoculars and gazed once more at the young man on the rock jetty, wondering what he was saying to the crowd. Behind him as he spoke great towering breakers would build up; a solid wall of water as big as a house would mount over his gesticulating arms, hang there above him for an instant as if about to engulf him, then crash around him in a torrent of foam. "He looks like a wild young fellow," the Major said as he handed the binoculars back. Before turning away he watched another wave tower over the young Irishman, hang for a moment, and at last topple to boil impotently around his feet. It was, after all, only the lack of perspective that made it seem he would be swept away.

Rereading that, I'm aware of an uncanny parallel between the "wild young fellow," presumably a Sinn Féin organizer, who wouldn't be swept away, and his creator, who would; and I'm reminded of some remarks, in a piece Jim wrote on his early reading, about the "hallucinating clarity of image" he admired in Conrad and Richard Hughes. He talks too about Loti's *Pêcheur d'Islande* which he read at school:

> I realised with surprise that I was becoming intensely interested in this story of Breton fishermen and their difficulties .... So powerful an impression did this book make on me that even today there are certain phenomena for which an expression of Loti's will alone suffice. A certain wintry light over the sea, for example, still conjures up Loti's *lumière blafarde*. I had no idea then, nor have I now, of the precise meaning of *blafard.* In my own mind it bears such perfect witness as it is, that to find its accepted meaning might prove an inconvenience.

Well, the Oxford French Dictionary gives "pale, pallid, wan, sallow, dull, leaden." But of course Jim is perfectly right: none of them is sufficiently *blafard*, with its edge of wildness, insanity even.

There was nothing obviously wild, much less insane, about the man I knew. Eccentric, yes; outspoken too. Adopting John Berger's precedent, he continued the practice, now alas in abeyance, whereby the recipient of a Booker Prize should bite the feeding hand in no uncertain terms. Presented with his winning check for *The Siege of Krishnapur*, he made a short speech of thanks in his mild, wandering voice and took the opportunity to criticize conditions on the Booker McConnell plantations in the West Indies.

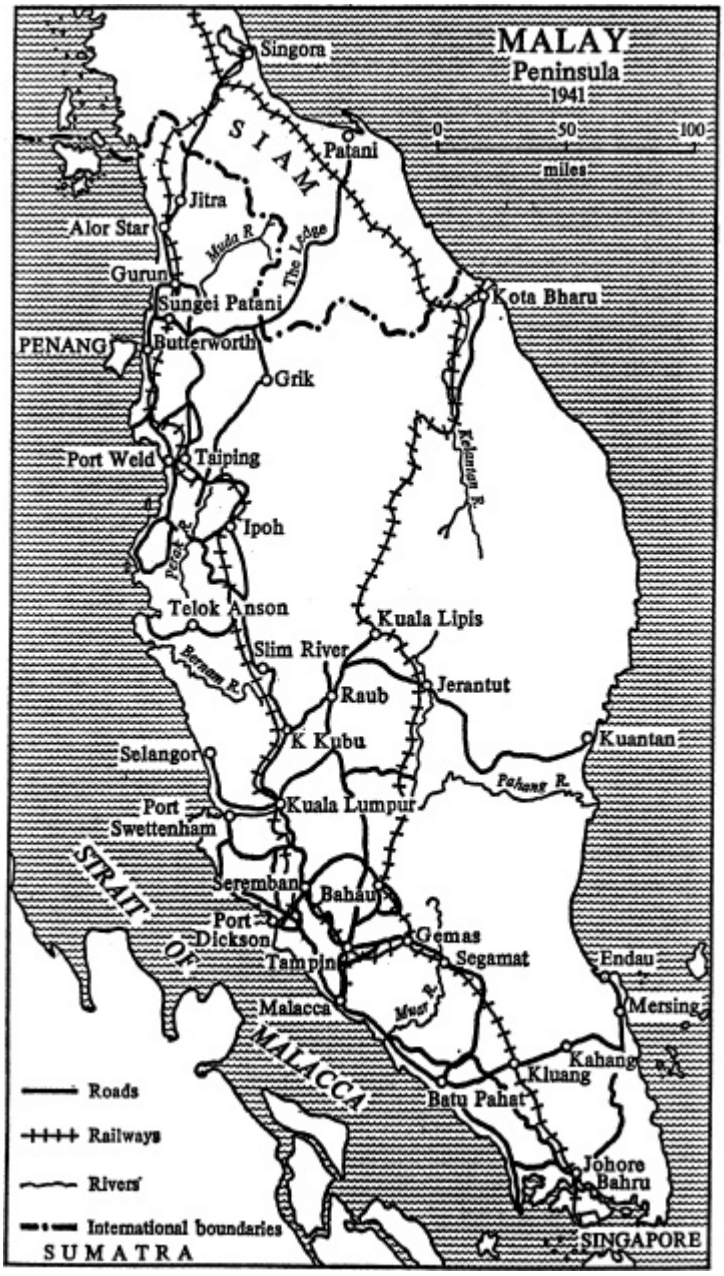
"We devote too much time to satisfying the ego, time which could be better spent in fruitful speculation or in the service of the senses; in any case, owning things one doesn't need for some primary purpose, and that includes almost everything, has gone clean out of fashion. I'm sorry to have to break this news of the death of materialism so bluntly; I'm afraid it will come as a shock to some of your readers." Thus spake Jim when, an unlikely fashion journalist, I interviewed him for *Vogue* in 1974. Ascetic epicurean, gregarious solitary, aristocrat of the spirit, he was then entering upon the late, disinterested "Marxist" phase (though he was never

really a Marxist) which would issue in his most ambitious work, *The Singapore Grip*, with its clear-eyed depiction of economic imperialism at work in Southeast Asia and the Far East.

But there's an intimation of something else too in his hip *Vogue* prophecy. When, at his mother's suggestion, my wife and I visited the Kilcrohane house in 1981, we found on his desk and bookshelves Japanese dictionaries and Buddhist texts which seemed to indicate the way his thoughts were tending during his last year, and even to reveal an important, if barely visible, aspect of his nature; for his early brush with death and subsequent singularity had developed in him a mystical strain, one which expressed itself in impatience with London and withdrawal to the silence of West Cork—there, in an old phrase, to make his soul. When the wise man grows weary of the world, said the Buddha, he becomes empty of desire;

> when he is empty of desire, he becomes free; when he is free he knows that he is free, that rebirth is at an end, that virtue is accomplished, that duty is done and that there is no more returning to this world; thus he knows.

—DEREK MAHON
Dublin, 1999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SUMATRA

For
Bob and Kathie Parrish

Author's Note

Odd though it may seem to attach a bibliography to a work of fiction, this novel depends very heavily on primary research conducted by others, as well as on opinions and personal experiences recorded by those who travelled, worked or fought in the Far East before or during the last War. Nevertheless the Singapore of these pages does not pretend to be anything but fictional: although many of its bricks are real, its architecture is entirely fantastic.

J.G.F.

Part One

1

The city of Singapore was not built up gradually, the way most cities are, by a natural deposit of commerce on the banks of some river or at a traditional confluence of trade routes. It was simply invented one morning early in the nineteenth century by a man looking at a map. 'Here,' he said to himself, 'is where we must have a city, half-way between India and China. This will be the great halting-place on the trade route to the Far East. Mind you, the Dutch will dislike it and Penang won't be pleased, not to mention Malacca.' This man's name was Sir Thomas Stamford Raffles: before the war his bronze statue used to stand in Empress Place in a stone alcove like a scallop shell (he has been moved along now and, turned to stone, occupies a shady spot by the river). He was by no means the lantern-jawed individual you might have expected: indeed, a rather vague-looking man in a frock coat.

Although people had once lived there, the island of Singapore, when he arrived, was largely deserted except for a prodigious quantity of rats and centipedes. Rather ominously, Raffles also noticed a great many human skulls and bones, the droppings of local pirates. He wasted no time, however, in negotiating for the island with an alarmed native and then proceeded, his biographer tells us, to set up a flag-pole thirty-six feet high. 'Our object,' he wrote in a letter to a friend, 'is not territory but trade: a great commercial emporium, and a *fulcrum*, whence we may extend our influence politically as circumstances may hereafter require.' As he stood there on that lonely beach and gazed up at the flag with rats and centipedes seething and tumbling over his shoes did Raffles foresee the prosperity which lay ahead for Singapore? Undoubtedly he did.

When you think of the city as it was forty years ago you should not imagine an uncivilized frontier-town of the jungle. You had only to stroll around the centre of the city with its wide avenues and lawns and look at the monolithic government buildings, at the luxurious department stores and at the marmoreal dignity of the banks, to realize that Singapore was the work of a great and civilized nation. True, there were other parts of the city, the various native quarters where Tamils, Malays, and above all the Chinese lived, which were rather less imposing. There, in those 'lower depths' Chinese secret societies undoubtedly performed monstrous crimes, kidnapped their own prominent citizens, fought out appalling territorial battles, stunned themselves with drugs and so forth. If you were merely a visitor, a sailor, say, in those years before the war, Singapore would undoubtedly have seemed no less tawdry, no less exciting than another of the great Eastern sea ports. You would have gone to drink and dance at one of the amusement parks, perhaps even at The Great World itself, whose dance-hall, a vast, echoing barn of a place, had for many years entertained lonely sailors like yourself. There, for twenty-five cents, you could dance with the most beautiful taxi-girls in the East, listen to the loudest bands and admire the glorious dragons painted on the walls. In the good old days, before the troops started flooding in at the beginning of the War, that place could swallow an entire ship's company and still seem empty except for you and the two or three Chinese girls with dolls' painted faces sitting at your table, ready to support you with tiny but firm hands should you look like plunging to the floor full of Tiger beer.

There, too, when you staggered outside into the sweltering night, you would have been able to inhale that incomparable smell of incense, of warm skin, of meat cooking in coconut oil, of honey and frangipani, and hair-oil and lust and sandalwood and heaven knows what, a perfume like the breath of life itself. And from the roof of the Seamen's Institute, or from some other less respectable roof, you might have seen the huge purple sign advertising Tiger Balm and, beside it, once darkness had completely fallen, its guardian, the great sabre-toothed tiger with glowing orange stripes beginning its nightly prowl over the sleeping roofs of Singapore. But there is no denying it, certain parts of the city were tawdry and others were wretched, and becoming more so as the age advanced: already, by 1940, the walls of cheap hotels and boarding-houses. hitherto impermeable except to an occasional muffled groan or sigh, were becoming porous and beginning to leak radio music, twangings of guitars and news bulletins. Every great city has its seamy side. And so let us look for preference at the gentler parts of the city at the elegant European suburb of Tanglin, for instance, where Walter Blackett, chairman of the illustrious merchant and agency house of Blackett and Webb Limited, lived with his family.

At first glance Tanglin resembled any quiet European suburb with its winding, tree-lined streets and pleasant bungalows. There was a golf course close at hand with quite respectable greens; numerous tennis courts could be seen on the other side of sweet-smelling hedges and even a swimming pool or two. It was a peaceful and leisurely life that people lived here, on the whole. Yet if you looked more closely you would see that it was a suburb ready to burst at the seams with a dreadful tropical energy. Foliage sprang up on every hand with a determination unknown to our own polite European vegetation. Dark, glistening green was smeared over everything as if with a palette knife, while in the gloom (the jungle tends to be gloomy) something sinister which had been making a noise a little while ago was now holding its breath.

If you left your bungalow unattended for a few months while you went home on leave, very likely you would come back to find that green lariats had been thrown over every projecting part and were wrestling it to the ground, that powerful ferns were drilling their way between its bricks, or that voracious house-eating insects, which were really nothing more than sharp jaws mounted on legs, had been making meals of the woodwork. Moreover, the mosquitoes in this particular suburb were only distant cousins of the mild insects which irritate us on an English summer evening: in Tanglin you had to face the dreaded anopheles variety, each a tiny flying hypodermic syringe containing a deadly dose of malaria. And if, by good fortune, you managed to avoid malaria there was still another mosquito waiting in the wings, this one clad in striped football socks, ready to inject you with dengue fever. If your child fell over while playing in the garden and cut its knee, you had better make sure that no fly was allowed to settle on the wound; otherwise, within a day or two, you would find yourself picking tiny white maggots out of it with tweezers. At that time, when parts of the suburb were still bordered by jungle, it was by no means uncommon for monkeys, snakes and suchlike to visit your garden with the idea of picking your fruit or swallowing your mice (or even your puppy if you had an appetizing one). But all I mean to suggest is that, besides the usual comforts of suburban life, there were certain disadvantages, too.

Not far from where the Blacketts lived Orchard Road sloped gently down (a gradient that was more psychological than real) almost straight for a mile or so until it lost itself on the fringes of Chinatown and the commercial city where Walter had his headquarters on Collyer Quay and did battle on weekdays. Down there in the city, taking the place of the rats and the centipedes which had once made it their home, seething, devouring, copulating, businesses rose and fell, sank their teeth into each other, swallowed, broke away, gulped down other firms, or mounted each other to procreate smaller companies, just as they do elsewhere in other great capitalist cities. But up here in Tanglin people moved in a quiet and orderly way about their daily affairs, apparently detached from these sordid encounters, detached especially from the densely packed native masses below. And yet they moved, one might suppose, as the hands of a clock move. Imagine a clock in a glass case; the hands move unruffled about their business, but at the same time we can see the working of springs and wheels and cogs. That ordered life in Tanglin depended on the same way on the city below, and on the mainland beyond the Causeway, whose trading, mining and plantation concerns might represent wheels and cogs while their mute, gigantic labour force are the springs, steadily causing pressures to be transmitted from one part of the organism to another … and not just as that time or just to Tanglin, of course, but much further in time and in space: to you thousands of miles away, reading in bed or in a deck-chair on the lawn, or to me as I sit writing at a table.

2

The Blacketts, on the whole, had reason to be satisfied with the calm and increasingly prosperous life they were leading in Singapore in 1937. Only once or twice in the two decades following the Great War had anything occurred to disturb their peace of mind and even then nothing that could be considered particularly serious. True, their elder daughter, Joan, had shown signs of becoming involved with unsuitable young men … but that is the sort of thing that any family with growing children has to expect.

Although his wife, Sylvia, became greatly agitated, Walter himself was inclined to take it calmly at first. Joan, who had recently returned from a finishing school in Switzerland, had found it hard to settle down in Singapore, separated from the friends she had made in Europe. She was rebellious, contemptuous of the provincial manners of the Straits, as one naturally would be, Walter supposed, after being at such a school (the school, incidentally, had been her mother's idea). Given time it was something that she would get over.

Joan's involvement with the first of these young men, a penniless flight-lieutenant whom she had met nobody knew where, was an act of rebellion probably. Even Joan had not tried very hard to pretend that he was anything but impossible. Besides, she knew well enough what her parents, who took a dim view of the Services, thought of even those generals and air vice-marshals whom duty had called to Singapore, let us not speak of flight-lieutenants. Walter had not set eyes on the person in question because Joan had had the good sense not to try to bring him home. He had waited calmly for her to see reason, explaining with a touch of exasperation to his wife that her tears and her fretting were a waste of energy which she could use to greater profit in some other direction, because Joan would presently come to her senses with or without the aid of her mother's tears. In due course, it had taken a little longer than he had expected, Walter's confidence had been justified. Joan had disposed of the flight-lieutenant as surreptitiously as she had found him. Tranquillity had returned to the Blackett household for a while.

Presently, however, it transpired that Mrs Blackett, testing the material of one of Joan's cotton frocks beween her finger and thumb, felt an unexpected crinkle of paper. Ah, what was this? Something left by the laundry? Mrs Blackett had happened to grasp the light material of her daughter's frock just where there was a pocket. Joan, who was in the frock at the time, blushed and said that it was nothing in particular, just a piece of paper of no importance. 'In that case,' replied Mrs Blackett, 'we had better throw it away immediately, because it does not do to let our clothes bulge out in an ugly fashion by carrying unnecessary things in our pockets.' Quick as a flash her fingers darted into the pocket and retrieved the offending piece of paper (as she

had suspected! a love-letter!) before Joan had time to retreat. The ensuing scene, the shrieking and hysterics and stamping of feet, even reached Walter who was upstairs in his dressing-room at the time, brooding on business matters. He gave the storm a little time to blow over but it showed no sign of doing so and at last he was obliged to come downstairs, afraid that they might burst blood-vessels in their passion. His appearance quelled mother and daughter instantly: they gazed at him glassily, breasts still heaving, faces tear-stained. He promptly sent Joan to her room and, when she had gone, reminded his wife that she was under instructions to take these matters calmly.

'The fact is, my dear, that these emotional scenes do no good at all. Quite the reverse. I should like to know how much you have found out about this young man as a result of all this shouting and screaming? My bet is … nothing.'

It was true. Mrs Blackett hung her head. Joan had declared that she would rather be dead than reveal the least thing about him, where she had met him, where he worked, even what his name was. 'His name appears to be "Barry",' said Walter with a sigh, perusing the letter, 'and I can even tell you where he works, since he has written on his firm's notepaper. As to where she met him, that is of no importance whatsoever. So all you have succeeded in doing is putting Joan's back up. In future kindly consult me before you say anything to Joan about her boyfriends. I shall now go and have a word with the young lady.'

Walter climbed the stairs thoughtfully. The marriage of his daughters was a matter to which he had not yet given a great deal of attention. And yet it was undoubtedly a matter of great importance, not only to Joan, as it would be, in due course, to little Kate, his younger daughter, but potentially to the business as well. After all, if you are a wealthy man you cannot have your daughter marrying the first adventurer who comes along. To allow such a match is to invite disaster. The fact was that Joan would do far better for herself and for Blackett and Webb Limited if she agreed to marry someone whose position in the Colony matched her own.

There were, as it happened, two or three young men in Singapore with whom a satisfactory alliance of this sort could have been made and who, given Joan's attractions, would have asked for nothing better. But when, on her return from her finishing school, such a union had been suggested to her, Joan had been indignant. She found the idea distasteful and old-fashioned. She would marry whom she pleased. Naturally the elder Blacketts in turn had been indignant. Walter had demanded to know why he had paid good money to such a school if not to drill some sense of reality into her. But Joan had been stubborn and Walter had quickly reached the conclusion that patience was the best policy. They would wait and see, tactfully fending off unsuitable young men in the meantime. Despite the scene which had just taken place Walter remained confident that Joan was too sensible a girl to remain permanently attached to someone whom her parents considered unsuitable.

Walter, climbing the stairs, had considered rebuking his daughter and ordering her not to communicate with this young man again. Instead he decided to continue banking on her good sense and merely said: 'Joan dear, I've no objection to you flirting with young men provided you are sensible about it and don't do anything you might regret later. What I do object to is the fact that you have upset your mother. In future please be more discreet and hide your love-letters in some safe place.' Joan, who had been expecting another row, gazed at him in astonishment as he handed her back the letter which had caused all the commotion.

Was Walter taking a great risk with his daughter's future by responding so mildly? Mrs Blackett was inclined to think that he was. Walter, however, reassured her. He was on friendly terms with the chairman of the firm on whose notepaper the young man wrote his love-letters and saw him frequently at the Club. He was confident that if the worst came to the worst and Joan persisted in taking an interest in him, it would require only a nod and a wink to have the fellow moved away from Singapore to a convenient distance (back to England if necessary). As it turned out, this intervention was not necessary: at a certain age nothing can be more stifling to enthusiasm than the permission or approval of your parents. 'Barry', (whoever he was), lovelorn, was allowed to continue his residence in Singapore.

Mrs Blackett now decided that the best way to prevent Joan from carrying on with unsuitable young men was to surround her with suitable ones. True, there was a serious shortage of the latter in Singapore but she would draw up a list and see what could be done … Joan's trouble was that she never met anyone of the right sort. Mrs Blackett would put an end to that by inviting one or two young men chosen by herself to tea once a week. Joan would be asked to act as hostess and Walter would be there, too, to keep an eye on things. What did Walter think of it? Was it not a good idea?

Walter was dubious. He doubted whether Joan would take an interest in any young chap of whom her mother approved. He was even more dubious when he saw the list that she had drawn up. But in the end he agreed, partly because he saw no reason why his wife should not have her own way for once, partly because he had a secret weakness. This weakness, which was so mild and agreeable it might almost be considered a virtue, was for holding forth, as a man with some experience of life, to younger men just starting out. So it would happen, once these weekly tea-parties were inaugurated, that while Joan sat tight-lipped and rebellious, her green eyes as hard as pebbles, Walter would grow animated and have a jolly good time. Mrs Blackett, meanwhile, would dart glances from her husband to her daughter to the young guest trying to estimate what impression each was making on the other. As a matter of fact, the young man usually sat there looking faintly alarmed as Walter harangued him: after all, this was Blackett of Blackett and Webb, an important man in the Straits, and his parents had told him to be careful not to put his foot in it and to behave

himself properly for once.

For a number of years now it had been Walter's agreeable habit to take his visitors by the arm and escort them along the row of paintings that hung in his drawing-room. So it happened that the young man intended for Joan, although on the whole he felt safer sitting down and less likely to knock something over, would reluctantly allow himself to be plucked out of his chair while Joan continued to sit mutinously silent beside the tea-pot, ignoring her mother's whispered entreaties that she should say something to her guest, and even accompany the two men across the room.

Some of the paintings which Walter was showing the young man were primitive in style, painted perhaps by a native artist or by a gifted ship's officer in his spare time: here was a three-masted vessel being loaded with spices or sugar, a line of native porters with bundles on their heads marching in uncertain perspective along a rickety quay surrounded by jungle. In the next painting, by a more sophisticated hand, the ship had arrived in Liverpool and was being unloaded again, and after that would come three or four paintings of the port of Rangoon and Walter would exclaim: 'Look! They're loading rice. Still all sailing ships, of course, and Rangoon's just a sleepy little village. But you wait!'

In the early days, he would explain, while the youth at his side gazed at him uneasily, white rice would not survive the long passage round the Cape and so it was shipped as what was known as 'cargo rice', that is, one-fifth unhusked paddy and four-fifths roughly cleaned in hand-mills. Throughout the East, to India mainly, it was shipped simply as paddy (The blighters cleaned it themselves.'). Now Walter, unreeling history at a prodigious speed, would guide his guest (well, Joan's guest) to a later picture of Rangoon. 'You see how it's grown in the meantime. And see how steam has taken the place of sail in the harbour (though some ships still have both, of course). And these great buildings with chimneys, d'you know what they are? Steam rice-mills!'

For now it was possible, with the opening of the Suez Canal in 1870, to ship cleaned rice to Europe, thereby cutting out the fine-millers who used to clean the 'cargo rice' in London.

'Ruined 'em,' Walter would remark with a frown. 'They weren't quick enough. A businessman must keep his wits about him.' And if the young man happened to be starting out on a business career himself, as he probably was, Walter might pause to lecture him on how you must always be ready to move with the times, never taking anything for granted.

'Go and join them!' hissed Mrs Blackett to her daughter in a penetrating whisper. 'You're being impolite to your guest.'

'But Mother, I've told you a thousand times …' And it was true … she had.

The last picture of Rangoon had been painted after the turn of the century and showed how the thriving rice trade had caused it to spread and grow into a great modern city, now only surpassed as an Eastern port by Calcutta and Bombay. Walter would draw his dismayed captive closer and after a moment's examination of the teeming wharves on the Rangoon River he would put his finger on a fine warehouse and say. 'Our first! The first to belong to Blackett and Webb … or rather, to Webb and Company as the firm was then called. We still have another exactly similar here in Singapore on the river. Well now, you see how a bit of trade can make a place grow?' And with an air of satisfaction he would lead the suitable young man on to yet more paintings of Calcutta, Penang, Malacca, and of Singapore itself, in various stages of development.

'You see how we made these little villages grow in just a few years. That's what a bit of tin and rubber have done for Singapore!'

There was still another painting to be seen, and one that was more important than all the others, but by now Mrs Blackett was growing impatient and calling Walter and his audience back for another cup of tea. These tea-parties, she was beginning to think, were not having the desired effect. A disturbing thought occurred to her and she eyed her daughter suspiciously. Could it be that the reason for Joan's lack of interest in her guest was that she was already carrying on in secret with yet another unsuitable young man?

3

Walter, after one such occasion, found himself left alone to brood in the drawing-room while Joan, with a sudden friendliness born of relief, conducted her guest to his motor-car and then went to join little Kate who was waiting on the lawn with a warped tennis racket for a game of French cricket. Joan was still just enough of a schoolgirl to enjoy such games. As the young man's limousine crept towards the gates his pale face appeared at one of the windows and he waved, but no one was paying any attention to his departure. He caught a glimpse of Joan, though, dashing joyfully after a tennis ball while Kate clumsily passed the racket round and round her plump little body, and he thought with a pang: 'What a smasher!' And rather well off, too. For once he and his parents were entirely in agreement. Too bad old Blackett was so peculiar!

Meanwhile, Mrs Blackett had seized the opportunity of slipping upstairs to Joan's room in order to set her mind at rest by having a quick read of her daughter's diary. She picked up this little volume and began to flick over its pages. So far, so good. There did not appear to be anything incriminating. She heaved a sigh of relief as the weeks fled by under her thumbnail. But then, just as she had almost reached this very week, she received a nasty shock, for the diary suddenly turned from plain English into a jumble of meaningless letters. What on earth did this signify? It could only be that Joan had taken to writing her diary in code! And that in

turn must mean that she had something to hide! Mrs Blackett, seriously alarmed, tried again and again to make sense of those jumbled letters but was quite unable to make anything of them. The only thing that she did discover was that the same name (she assumed it was a name because it began with a capital letter) kept recurring: '*Solrac*'!

'Oh dear, he must be a Hungarian this time!' thought Mrs Blackett, raising a hand to her brow.

Downstairs she found Walter still in the drawing-room, musing in front of the most important painting in his collection, the one which he had not had time to show Joan's young guest. He merely greeted her revelations about the diary in code with a shrug, however, and told her to calm herself … any family with growing daughters must expect occasional difficulties of this sort. It was in the nature of things. Mrs Blackett retired, by no means reassured.

The painting which had pride of place in Walter's vast drawing-room and in front of which he was now standing, was not yet another view of an embryonic city, but of a man. It was a portrait of old Mr Webb himself, a bearded, sharp-featured gentleman of great dignity. Walter, when given the opportunity, would lead his guests up to this portrait and speak with respectful warmth of his former partner, the man without whom he himself 'would never have amounted to anything'. For it had been Mr Webb who had given young Walter Blackett a chance to compete with the giant firms of the Far East like Guthries, Jardines and Sime Darby, by agreeing to merge his own powerful business with Walter's fledgling. And they had got on well together, too, so that in no time a real understanding had been established between them. Besides, growing older now, Mr Webb had needed the energy of a younger partner. In due course Blackett and Webb Limited had been the result.

A lesser man, as he grew weaker, would have held grimly on to everything, with the result that within a few years both the rubber and the agency business would have tumbled about his ears. But old Mr Webb, never afraid to face unpleasant realities, had realized that the years ahead would be too much for him. Perhaps, too, he had dimly perceived some of the approaching hazards of the next decade: in particular, the growing rivalry with Japan in the markets of the Far East. There are few things in life more difficult than for a man to retire from the business he has founded and built up himself. Yet this difficult feat had been managed, at least reasonably well, by Mr Webb when Walter had taken over completely in 1930. And there had still remained a firm bond of mutual respect between the two men.

After his retirement Mr Webb's main interest had been in a small estate business known as the Mayfair Rubber Company which he had kept back, he would explain, as an old man's plaything. He was chairman of this company but his duties were not onerous: the Mayfair was one of the assortment of independent companies whose day-to-day management was handled collectively by Blackett and Webb with an efficiency that neither of them, alone, could have matched. No, it was more likely, if the truth were known, that he had seen the Mayfair as a convenient Old Gentleman's Home. From this point of view there was something to be said for the Mayfair, however slender the yield from its estate in Johore.

When he retires an elderly gentleman needs a pleasant place to live: the Mayfair had maintained its Singapore headquarters for many years back, not in the commercial district as you might expect, but in a rambling, palatial bungalow in Tanglin, adjacent to Walter's own splendid mansion so that only a pleasant stroll through two compounds separated them. A retired gentleman needs the respect and assistance of those around him … who is more respected and assisted than a chairman in his own company? He needs something to keep him interested in life lest he slip out of it through the inattention that besieges the elderly … what better than his own rubber company? On the other hand, he needs to be left alone, not bothered by people, because they increasingly irritate him … whose peace of mind is more carefully preserved than the chairman's? This last point had been particularly important to old Mr Webb.

He had lived alone all his life and did not mean to change his ways simply because he was getting on in years. Surprisingly, he was married. But his wife was in England and always had been. He had married her late in life and never encouraged her to come out to Malaya. Perhaps he had been afraid that people would laugh at him, for she was some thirty years younger than himself (she was dead now, though: he had outlasted her despite those thirty years). More likely, he had simply preferred living by himself and his wife had not seemed to mind, as far as anyone knew. Moreover, he had paid visits to her in England where he was sometimes obliged to go on business. On one of these visits he had even made her pregnant, which speaks for cordial relations. The result of their union had been a son called Matthew who, like his mother, had never appeared in Singapore.

At one time Mr Webb had had the notion that young Matthew should marry Joan. Yes, the old chap had taken a benevolent interest in her as a little girl, showering her with silver spoons, napkin rings and strings of pearls. No doubt Mr Webb, used to his own somewhat despotic family arrangements, had seen no reason why authority should not be exercised to merge families in the same way as businesses. Walter smiled. That might have saved all this bother with unsuitable young men! But by the mid-thirties this union was no longer mentioned, nor had been for some years.

Matthew and Joan … they might almost had been designed for each other. What a shame! As it happened, neither Walter nor the rest of his family, except for his younger daughter, Kate, had set eyes on Matthew although they, too, had made occasional visits to England. Matthew and Walter's son, Monty, were roughly the same age, yet when Monty had been at school in England Matthew had not joined him … he had been

sent to school in Switzerland, or in Sweden, or in some other country. For, Walter recalled, gazing sadly at the portrait of his former partner, in the smooth and otherwise flawless edifice which Mr Webb had constructed around himself in preparation for a dignified and comfortable old age, a single nasty crack had appeared.

Old Mr Webb, although his faculties had remained unimpaired in most respects, had been assailed by certain progressive ideas about diet and education and Matthew had been brought up in accordance with them. This was surely a tragedy worthy of that… what was his name? … that French blighter … yes, Balzac, that was it. The most progressive of all the schools Matthew had been sent to, so Walter had heard, had taken co-education to the limit of allowing no distinction whatsoever to be made between the sexes. Children were known simply by the title 'Citizen' and a surname. Boys and girls alike wore the same baggy, flowing pantaloons and bullfighter jackets. They swam naked together in the swimming pool, had their hair cropped to a similar length, played the same noncompetitive games, and were allowed to unroll their sleeping mats in whichever dormitory they pleased provided it was not in the same one two nights running.

This was undoubtedly the most extreme of several private schools which Matthew had attended. The others had probably specialized in nothing more extreme than vegetarianism and some form of non-coercive teaching. Yet the thought of these schools still haunted Walter to this day. He had done his best to remonstrate, mind you, but the old man was obstinate and had shown himself ready to take offence. The matter had had to be dropped. But what all these schools had done to young Matthew, Walter could only wonder. It seemed to him pathetic beyond words that this old gentleman, whose own life had been an example of rectitude, hard work and self-discipline, should have succumbed to such an array of peculiar and debilitating theories, the very opposite of everything that he himself had stood for.

Only too glad would Walter have been if events had proved him wrong, if the fatal vegetarian flaw had not brought about the tragedy he feared. But this was not to be. One of Mr Webb's visits to England had coincided with the General Strike of 1926. Matthew had been a student at Oxford at the time. While his fellow undergraduates had poured cheerfully out of their colleges to lend a hand in breaking the strike Matthew had skulked in his room 'sporting his oak' (Walter understood this to be university jargon for 'keeping his door shut'). Despite the shut door Mr Webb had argued with his son. Very likely the word 'patriotism' had been mentioned.

Walter had received no first-hand account of the meeting but somehow he pictured Mr Webb standing on the lawn of Brasenose College holding up fistfuls of white hair to the icy wind that howled through the quad, while dismal dons, looking up from their books, surveyed this representative of suffering humanity with distaste from leaded casements. He understood that after wandering about for a day or two the old chap had offered his own services as a tram-conductor. They had been refused, of course. No matter how enthusiastic he might be, for the serious business of collecting fares and clubbing trouble-makers off the rear platform he was much too frail. He had retired to Singapore then, having watched the strike collapse without his son's assistance.

At one time it had been understood that Matthew would take his place in the firm one day. But after 1926 this was no longer discussed. Matthew's mother had died suddenly in 1930 and Matthew himself had seldom been mentioned after that. He was known to be living in Geneva where he had some job connected with the League of Nations. And that, reflected Walter, given the poor boy's peculiar education, is about what one might have expected! Old Mr Webb was still alive, by the way, and on certain social occasions he could still be seen in Walter's garden or drawing-room, looking no less upright and dignified than the old gentleman in the portrait which Walter had just been contemplating. 'Matthew and Joan … what a shame indeed. It would have suited the firm nicely.' And with a sigh Walter went to look for his wife who had retired to her room with a pencil and a piece of paper, determined to break the code in which Joan had taken to writing her diary.

Never in her life had Mrs Blackett subjected herself to such mental effort as she did during the next few days in her attempt to make sense of those mysteriously jumbled letters. She tried everything she could think of, she pummelled her brain with one theory after another, she covered the floor of her bedroom with crumpled pieces of paper, she grew thin and haggard, but still without result. At last, however, as she sat defeated in front of her dressing-table gazing at her hollow-eyed reflection and still with a line of Joan's fiendish code gripped in her fingers, chance came to her rescue: she dropped her eyes to the reflection of the paper and found that she could read it without difficulty! It was the simplest of all codes used by children: mirror-writing. She searched feverishly for the other coded sentences she had copied from Joan's diary and held them to the mirror, her lips working … There was a knock on the door and Walter came in, looking sombre.

'He's not a Hungarian!' cried Mrs Blackett. 'He's a …'

'A Brazilian, I know. It's even worse.'

'Walter, how do you know?'

'I just asked Joan. What's more, I have a feeling that this time it may be more serious.'

Walter was beginning to think that although difficulties of this sort were in the natural order of things and were such as any family with growing daughters has to expect, a Brazilian was going a tiny bit too far. Weary of his wife's efforts to break Joan's code he had decided to approach his daughter directly. Joan had replied without hesitation that the object of her affections was a secretary at the Brazilian Legation in Peking who had

come to visit Singapore for an extended holiday. They would probably be married in a year or two in Rio de Janeiro, once she had had time to become a Catholic. Although his family did not have much money (they were rather hard up, actually), they were direct descendents of King Alfonso or someone of Spain, or was it Portugal? She was glad that Walter had brought the matter up because she had been on the point of asking whether she could invite Carlos to tea. Oh yes, and if Walter did not mind, it might be best not to show him all the paintings of Rangoon, at least to begin with, until they all knew each other better.

This was serious, undoubtedly. But Walter did not lose his nerve. He knew Joan to have an obstinate streak in her and had quickly decided, in spite of the danger, that the best policy would be to continue as before, counting on her good sense. He believed that given time she would perceive that an impoverished Brazilian was out of the question. Still, this talk of marriage was disquieting. He replied guardedly that he saw no reason why Carlos should not come to tea. In return Joan gave him a kiss.

Carlos, it turned out, wore a monocle, affecting to be a British gentleman. Over tea (this time it was Mrs Blackett's turn to remain tight-lipped and sullen) Carlos explained to Walter that in the Brazilian Legation in Peking there had been nothing whatsoever to do … nobody there did any work, not a bit, not an ounce, not a scrap! And he uttered a high, bleating laugh, also modelled on that of a British gentleman. One reason nobody did any work in Peking was because the Chinese Government was not there, nowhere near! The blessed thing was miles away in Nanking! In any case, the Chinese and Brazilian governments had nothing whatever to say to each other, not a blessed word! No Brazilian had been near China for centuries! So what could a chap do? he enquired, failing to notice the unfortunate impression he was producing on Walter. What could a chap do but spend his entire day in riding-breeches or tennis flannels and his evenings dancing on the roof of the Grand Hôtel de Pékin? 'A poor show, actually,' he added regretfully, somewhat to Walter's surprise. After a long silence he dropped his monocle glumly into his handkerchief and began to polish. Walter had agreed with his last remark. He glanced quickly at Joan but her face was impassive and he could not tell what she was thinking.

Carlos cleared his throat. Sometimes, when they needed a change from Peking, they would go on leave to Shanghai. He brightened a little. Did Walter know that the Lambeth Walk was now all the rage in Shanghai's nightclubs?

Once he had met Carlos, Walter was reassured. Joan, a sensible girl who knew how important her eventual marriage would be both to herself and to her father's business, could not fail to see how thoroughly impossible he was. Walter was amazed, indeed, that she should have been able to put up with him for a day, let alone a week. But somehow she seemed able to manage it and, presently, the week became several weeks. As time went on, Walter's confidence diminished. He had almost decided to use his parental authority to put a stop to the liaison when he happened to mention the matter to a French friend, a certain François Dupigny, who was passing through Singapore at the time. Dupigny, to whom he had applied for information about the young man's background in the hope of uncovering something discreditable, exercised some important function in the Indo-Chinese Government on behalf of the French Colonial Ministry; he was unusually well-connected in the Far East and had an ear for gossip.

Although, as it turned out, Dupigny knew nothing at all about Carlos he threw up his hands in dismay at Walter's idea that the two young people should be prevented from seeing each other. On the contrary, he declared, nothing could be worse for Walter's cause! The lovers should be not only permitted but *obliged* to spend as much time in each other's company as decorum and chastity allowed. In such circumstances nothing could be better guaranteed to pour icy water over the passion of one young person than intimate acquaintance with the other!

Walter was taken aback by this cynical view, though there might be a grain of truth in it, he had to admit. In all probability, however, he would not have adopted such an unconventional approach to his difficulty had not Joan, at that very moment, asked for permission to visit Shanghai for a holiday in the company of Carlos … and, of course, of her mother who would have to be persuaded to act as chaperon. Joan naturally expected a refusal and, seeing him hesitate, began to show signs of indignation and rebellion. But Walter's hesitation was less concerned with Carlos than with the political situation in Shanghai and in China generally. He recalled the trouble there had been there in 1932, of which he had been given a vivid description by the manager of Blackett and Webb's Shanghai branch. The curious scene which he had evoked had for some reason remained in Walter's mind: a chilly night in January, the booming chimes of the Custom House clock dying away into silence over the rainswept city, and then the sudden rattle of rifle and machine gun fire.

As was usually the case with these China 'incidents' the rights and wrongs of the affair had been thickly cloaked in ambiguity. All that one could say for certain was that soon after eleven p.m. an armed contingent of the Japanese Naval Landing Party led by men carrying flaming torches had crossed the border from the International Settlement into Chapei. They had been greeted with a hail of bullets by the bitterly anti-Japanese, anti-foreign, pro-revolutionary Nineteenth Route Army: in no time the streets around the North Station had been littered with dead Japanese Marines. The Japanese had not thought to switch out the streetlights and, with the brilliantly lit International Settlement behind them, had made an easy target for the Chinese in the darkness of Chapei. And since the North Szechuan Road between the Post Office and North Honan Road had remained illuminated and the sound of gunfire could be heard all over the Foreign Concession area, presently taxis and private motor-cars began to arrive loaded with Europeans and Americans

in evening-dress who had stopped by on their way from theatres, restaurants and dinner-parties to see the fun. In a few minutes a cheerful, chattering crowd had gathered, champagne was being sipped and neighbouring cafe proprietors had been roused to supply hot coffee and sandwiches. The general view of this good-humoured, after-theatre audience was that the good old Japs were saving Britain, France and America the trouble of teaching the Chinese a lesson. For undoubtedly the Chinese, with their growing 'anti-foreign' and nationalistic feeling, had been getting too big for their boots. Allow them to continue in this direction and it would not be too long before the various commercial and legal privileges enjoyed by the Great Powers in China would be at an end.

Walter, still hesitating, reflected that the 'anti-foreign' feeling in China had not diminished and could still be a source of trouble. On the other hand, it was now mainly concentrated on the Japanese, who thus acted as a lightning-conductor for Europeans and Americans. This spring (of 1937) had been relatively quiet, apart from reports of increased Japanese troop movements in Manchuria. Besides, the various garrisons of the Foreign Concessions had been greatly strengthened and the Chinese were so busy fighting among themselves that the threat to Shanghai appeared negligible.

'I see no reason why you shouldn't go,' Walter said calmly, 'provided you don't do anything foolish.' And then, though not without misgivings, he settled down to await developments. He was beginning to realize that the marriage of a daughter to the right sort of young man is a matter to which a great deal of attention must be given, whether you like it or not.

4

'But don't you see, Papa dear,' said Joan, reclining on her bed in her underwear and luxuriating in the draught of the fan directly above her, 'how it could come as a shock to a nicely brought-up girl like me who has always been either at home or at school. It was *absolutely* shocking, I mean, and Mama was quite as taken aback as I was, at least she turned as white as milk and I thought she was going to faint. Her eyes got a funny look in them and even Carlos, in his absurd British clothes, looked a bit shaken. Actually, it was a good job Carlos was there because although I don't think he'd seen much of the rougher side of life either, at least his presence was reassuring. He was a *man*, at any rate, even though I know you think he's a bit ridiculous, and his clothes, a tweed suit I think it was, did tremendously inspire confidence. Anyway, without him and his tweeds and his monocle I'm quite sure that Mama would have fainted and think what problems that might have caused in the middle of I think it was called Hongkew and Mama already complaining that she was worn out because we had spent most of the afternoon trailing around the Japanese part looking for this wretched silk shop and being sent on one wild-goose chase after another and it would soon be getting dark and she wanted to get back to Bubbling Well Road where she felt safer and, anyway, I should have felt distinctly uncomfortable, particularly as all the rickshaw coolies vanished the moment they saw there was going to be trouble with Japanese soldiers arriving and, trust him! Carlos had told his chauffeur to pick us up not there, but two or three streets away. By the way, have I shown you the remains of my blisters?

'Well, no, Daddy, I agree that nothing did happen … We weren't actually molested but we easily could have been. It was more the feeling of being, well, vulnerable. One moment we were strolling along peacefully and the next the street was full of cars and lorries and little Jap soldiers pouring out … Well, all right then, I admit there was only one car and no lorry and only three or four soldiers poured out of it, the car, I mean, but still it was quite frightening when they started herding us in to the side of the pavement with their rifle butts and there was an officer who looked like a chimpanzee with a sword several times too long for him which he kept tripping over in the most ludicrous fashion. Until then it seemed at least *fairly* amusing, though Mama was getting apprehensive and Carlos was looking helpless and saying something like: 'What a to-do!' which frankly wasn't very helpful of him because Mummy and I could think of that much ourselves. Well, we tried to walk on and they wouldn't let us, and then Carlos suddenly stopped saying 'Bless my soul' and began to rattle away in Portuguese and got quite red in the face because he had seen that they'd blocked off the end of the street and he was afraid that he might be involved in heaven knows what, a diplomatic incident perhaps?

'Of *course*, there was no reason to be alarmed, I'm not saying there *was*! All I'm saying is that it did occur to one that the Jap soldiers could turn nasty and their bayonets looked very sharp, even though there were only three or four of them, and in the meantime the street had suddenly filled with people pressing around the doorway that the soldiers had gone into and some of them looked pretty worked up about something, so unlike the Chinese who are usually well-behaved and mind their own business (or at least they do here in Singapore, don't they?) and I'd never realized before how much smaller they are than us, because our three heads were sticking out of the crowd and it felt a bit like *Gulliver's Travels* or something.

'Anyway, then two Jap soldiers came out of the doorway again carrying someone. All I could see at first was the front man who had a very shiny leather boot gripped in the palm of each hand … I never did see the rest of him properly, I'm glad to say, just a hand trailing along the pavement and then a glimpse of a shape with its tunic and trousers undone and a horrid mass of red stuff around its middle. He was S-shaped because of the way they were carrying him and he had a sword, too, which scraped tinnily on the ground and kept getting in the way of the man behind who had him by the armpits. But really what gave me such a shock was

the Chinese girl they dragged out of the doorway and threw up against the wall … at least, I thought then that she was Chinese because of her clothes, she was wearing a quilted tunic and black silk trousers and I'd never seen a Eurasian wear anything but European clothes, even though there was something about the colour of her hair which was a very dark red, I naturally thought that she had simply dyed it, which would have been nothing compared to the weird creatures in some of the nightclubs which Carlos had persuaded us to go to the night before. The point is that she looked as if she were about my age or even younger, and then she saw me in the crowd and that is what I found so upsetting.

'Well, it's not my fault that I've led such a sheltered life, is it? I suddenly thought that if I hadn't been English it could have been *me* up against that wall. The little officer was shouting at her and striking her. Her face had gone grey, I mean *literally* grey, the colour of porridge. It gives you a shock yourself to see someone so frightened. Afterwards I couldn't get it out of my mind. I kept thinking that if she were English she'd have only just left school like me.

'I don't know where everybody came from but by that time the street was full of people clustered in a very tight semicircle around the Japanese officer and the girl and the other two soldiers who had carried the dead man out of the house were having trouble getting through the crowd again to reach them. And suddenly … he was so busy screaming at the girl and slapping her face that he hadn't noticed the crowd behind him … suddenly, they pressed forward and swallowed him and the girl up completely. There was some shoving and kicking and I think he tried to draw his sword but he was so tightly packed in with everyone else that of course he couldn't do anything. And at that moment Carlos said: "Now's our chance to beetle off" because the Japanese soldiers who had gone to the end of the street to stop people leaving were coming running back to rescue their officer, and between us Carlos and I managed to drag Mama around the corner and then he went off to find the car, and in no time we were drinking a much-needed cup of tea at the Park Hotel, all back safe and sound on Bubbling Well Road.

'Well, that was that, and even Mama gradually came to see that she had had a little adventure and felt quite pleased with herself, especially when Carlos got hold of a newspaper which said that the officer had been lured into that house by a girl and then murdered by Communists. It didn't say anything about what happened to the girl. Anyway, as I say, that was that and the holiday continued as before with sight-seeing and shopping et cetera and we went to the Moscowa nightclub which was full of the most divinely beautiful Russian girls, all aristocrats, Carlos said, I felt so jealous of them and … thank you, Daddy dear, but I know very well that I don't though I wish I did, it must be nice … and so on and then, then it was time to go on board again to come back to dear old Singapore and Mama had to make a fuss about the way her maid was doing the packing, just rolling things up and cramming them into our trunks and, as you know, Mama has only to set *eyes* on a boat to get sea-sick, and so it was really lucky that Carlo was there, even though he was beginning to get on our nerves a bit and we'd privately christened him "The Stage Butler" because he was always so polite and pompous, because otherwise I'd have had to mope about by myself, what with Mama groaning and swallowing tablets in her cabin and all.

'Well, we had lots of lovely dances and games on deck and simply enormous meals and one evening with some other young people we'd met we all got a bit tipsy and decided we'd have an adventure and explore the ship and prowl around in the cabin class and the third-class parts of the boat where one wasn't normally supposed to go. So we set off in a horde, the men in dinner-jackets smoking cigars and us girls in our most gorgeous evening dresses, giggling with champagne and silly jokes and some of the men were even wearing funny hats. Straight away we ran into a hitch. A locked door. Steward won't let us through. "I say, Carlos," said one of the men, "why don't you bribe the fearful little fellow while we look the other way," and we all whooped and shoved Carlos forward and being a Brazilian, of course, he was frightfully good at bribing people and in no time we were pouring through into the other classes.

'Actually, it was then that we began to realize that it was probably rather a boring idea after all to go prowling about in the other classes … There was really nothing much to *do*! And one of the men who was in the Diplomatic … He told me his name was Sinclair Sinclair (he had a stammer and he always said it twice and I never found out whether it was really that or whether he was just repeating one of his names) and had been to Harrow and was a great sport and was something like the millionth secretary in Bangkok or somewhere … he said : "I say, I don't know what you people think b-b-but it seems to me that the other cluh-cluh-cluh … parts of the ship are just a tiny bit disappointing, if you get m'meaning," and he did rather say what was in everyone's mind. And someone else said: "I mean to say, it's ever so slightly *dingy*, which is not to say that it's not frightfully jolly in its way, and all that.'

And soon we were all feeling pretty glum which was awful considering how cheerful we'd been just a few minutes before. And by that time we'd come to another locked door and almost decided to go back but Carlos, alias the Stage Butler, had already bribed somebody, sort of automatically, and he was opening the door so we went through that one, too. And that was a mistake because on the other side of that door things were really pretty grim and we found ourselves trooping through a sort of dreadful dormitory with bunks which had a ghastly stuffy smell and was full of half-naked people snoring, and Sinclair Sinclair said: "I think we must be in one of the *holds*," and one of the girls began to feel faint, but the man had locked the door behind us again and we couldn't find anybody else to open it and we were afraid the girl was going to faint or have hysterics or something. So someone said that there must be a way of getting up to the deck … that there was a law of

the sea or something which said even third-class passengers had to have a way of getting on to the deck, and so we decided to wait up on deck in the fresh air while we sent Carlos to bribe somebody to get us back to the first class. Incidentally, when I told Sinclair about the man I'd seen in Shanghai with strawberry jam coming out of his stomach he wasn't at all impressed and said he'd seen lots of things like that and that Asiatics were always killing each other. *It seems they don't mind*. It's been proved scientifically, that's what Sinclair said anyway.

'In the end we found some stairs and got up on to the deck and thank heaven because it was ghastly down there. Someone said that now he knew why it was called the bowels of the ship but nobody laughed because it was vulgar. And even on deck there were people sleeping huddled here and there, Chinese, I think, I suppose they didn't care for it down below either. It was quite warm and there was a lovely moon and a soft breeze. After crawling about down below it was super to be in the fresh air again and one of the men produced a bottle of champagne he'd brought with him and we all took a swig and felt quite merry again. And while we were waiting for Carlos to come back Sinclair Sinclair told us about a game he and his chums used to play in Paris when he was learning French (which they all have to in the Diplomatic) … it was called *saute-clochard*: evidently all the beggars in Paris sleep in rows over the hot-air vents from the Métro in winter to keep warm and the game consisted in seeing how many you could jump over at a time: it sounds a bit heartless, I must say, but anyway, Sinclair announced that he had decided to beat the world record for *saute-Chinois* which meant the number of Chinamen he could jump over at a time and he said he'd never have a better opportunity than the present. All the other men egged him on and in a flash he'd taken off his dinner-jacket and was pounding over the deck towards a row of sleeping Chinese. Then he leaped into the air and … oh, incidentally, I've just remembered something I wanted to ask you. When we were on the way out and stopping at ports here and there before reaching Shanghai … I think it was the morning after we left Canton and we were steaming up a river into Wuchow in Kwangsi Province, anyway, someone pointed out a golf club on the left-hand bank and said it was definitely the most exclusive in the world and when I asked why? he said because it only had four members, the manager and assistant-manager of the Standard Oil Company and the same of the Asiatic Petroleum Company, but that's ridiculous, isn't it? A golf club with only four members. He was only joking, wasn't he? Really! Good heavens! How d'you mean, "Chinese don't play golf?" Now *you're* making fun of me. But sorry, I'll go on: Sinclair leaped into the air and must have jumped over at least a dozen Chinese who were asleep on the deck and luckily didn't land on one … but not so luckily he did catch his foot against something, a piece of iron or a rope or I don't know what, and took a nasty fall on the deck and grazed his knees and palms and tore his trousers and made a frightful din.

That's when some of the Chinese woke up and looked at us. I was quite near one of the lights and happened to be looking in the direction of one of the bundles when it stirred and sat up. It was the girl I'd seen in Shanghai shoved against the wall by the Jap officer. I was only a few feet away. I'd have recognized her even if her face hadn't been still all bruised and swollen. And she recognized me, too, I could see that. I smiled at her and said something like I was glad she had got away and was she all right? She didn't say anything at first and I thought, of course she wouldn't speak English and she was obviously shocked to see someone who recognized her. But then she suddenly asked me in perfect English, you know, like an educated person, if I would please not tell anyone about the business with the Jap officer because she was afraid that if people knew about it they might not give her a landing-permit in Singapore and that she was going there to get away from the Japanese. Her name was Miss Chiang, she said, Vera Chiang, and her mother had been a Russian who'd had to leave during the Revolution and then had died and she'd been educated in an American mission in Manchuria or somewhere and that she'd had nothing to do with the man who'd been killed and had never seen him before. Of course, I said I wouldn't tell anyone and I gave her your card with the firm's name on and my name and said to get in touch if she needed help getting work or something. And that, Papa dear, was all that happened except that the Stage Butler started making scenes because he was jealous of me talking to Sinclair Sinclair, but it wasn't my fault if Sinclair was more amusing and I can't bear it when men are jealous and want to have you all to themselves and keep trying to have "serious talks". In the end Mummy and I stopped calling him the Stage Butler and christened him High Dudgeon because of the way he kept stalking about the ship and sulking. Because of him it was quite a relief to see Singapore and the good old Empire Dock and there were the usual little brown boys diving for pennies, but one thing I'd never noticed before was that there were one or two quite old men diving for pennies, or would have except we preferred to throw them for the boys. And that was that except that I forgot to tell you what happened to Sinclair Sinclair. One of the Chinamen he had jumped over turned out to be a very big man and was in a fearful rage about it, and he just picked up poor Sinclair and threw him overboard and there was a terrible splash and he just vanished in the wake … no, Daddy, you're tickling … and was never seen again. No! Daddy, stop! You're hurting … I'm sorry, I'll never tell a lie again! I promise!'

5

Late in September 1940 at a garden-party given by the Blacketts for a large number of the most influential people in the Straits a further incident occurred to disturb their tranquil lives. Joan unexpectedly threw a glass

of champagne in the face of one of the guests. The victim was a young officer from the American military attaché's office, Captain James Ehrendorf. Fortunately, though, he was more or less a friend of the family and showed no sign of wanting to make a fuss.

The success, of this garden-party (for which, incidentally, old Mr Webb's birthday had been chosen) was important to both Walter Blackett and his wife. For Walter its importance lay in the fact that it was the forerunner of a series of social occasions planned to celebrate his firm's jubilee in the coming year. Webb and Company had been founded in Rangoon in 1891 and its first office in Singapore had been opened shortly afterwards. It was hoped that twelve months of rejoicing, symbolized by an occasional garden-party, firework display or exhibition of Blackett and Webb services and produce, would culminate at the New Year of 1942 in one of those monster carnival parades so beloved of the Chinese in Singapore. The outbreak of the war in Europe had for a time thrown these festivities into question, but the Government, it transpired, was anxious for propaganda purposes that they should continue in order to combat the ceaseless anti-British ravings from Tokyo. It was felt that nothing could better demostrate the benefits of British rule than to recall fifty years of one of Singapore's great merchant houses and the vast increase of wealth which it had helped to generate in the community for the benefit of all. As for Sylvia Blackett, this garden-party was taking place in the absence of her only serious rivals in the Crown Colony's society (the Governor and Lady Thomas had departed for eight months' leave in Europe) and she believed that provided all went well nothing more was required to consolidate her already well-established social position.

The Blacketts lived in a magnificent old colonial house of a kind rare in Singapore, built of brick and dating back seventy years or more. The ranks of fat white pillars that supported its upper balconies combined with the floods of staircases that spilled out on either side of its portico like cream from the lip of a jug to give the building a classical, almost judicial appearance, and yet, at the same time, an air of ease, comfort, even sensuality. This impression was heightened by the lush and colourful gardens down into which the staircases flowed. Here fountains played on neatly mown aquamarine lawns flanked by brilliant 'flame of the forest' trees. Behind one accurately-trimmed hedge were the tennis courts, behind another the path that led to the Orchid House; in the middle of the largest expanse of lawn was the swimming pool whose blue-green water, casting jagged sparks of reflected sunlight at the white shuttered windows of the bedrooms above, seemed merely to be the lawn itself turned liquid. Beyond the pool a shady corridor of pili nut trees with white flowers or purple-black fruit depending on maturity led to an even more colourful wilderness of rare shrubs. Whoever had planted this part of the garden had tried to escape from the real, somewhat brooding vegetation of the tropics in order to create an atmosphere of colour and brilliance, the tropics of a child's imagination. Here pink crêpe myrtle and African mallow crowded beside the white narcissus flowers of kopsia and the astonishing scarlet of the Indian coral tree and behind them a silent orchestra of colours: cassia, rambutan, horse-radish, 'rose of the mountain' and mauve and white-flowered potato trees until the mind grew dizzy. Scintillating butterflies, some as big as your hand, with apricot, green or cinnamon wings lurched through the heavily perfumed air from one blossom to another. Mrs Blackett, however, no longer ventured into this part of the garden despite the brightness and colour. She found herself sickened by the sweet, heavy smell of the blossoms. Besides, the grounds of the Mayfair Rubber Company were adjacent to this brilliant, leafy grove and she was afraid that she might catch a glimpse of old Mr Webb prowling about naked, pruning his roses with secateurs or, for that matter, doing heaven knows what.

Even before Joan threw the wine at Captain Ehrendorf Mrs Blackett had become aware that she would have to deploy all her social skills to avoid the sort of disaster that is talked about for years in a place like Singapore: this was because Walter, without consulting her, had invited General Bond, the General Officer Commanding, Singapore, while she herself, without consulting Walter, had invited Air-Marshal Babington, the Air Officer Commanding, Far East. Rumours about the rivalry of these two officers had been percolating for some time in the Colony. The open dislike which the General showed for the Air-Marshal was matched only by that which the latter showed towards the former, and on each side was duly reflected, as in a hall of mirrors, by the hordes of aides and subordinate officers who devoted themselves to aping their respective commanders. Air-Marshal Babington, asserted the gossips at the various 'long bars' that sprinkled the city, was filled with envy by the fact that his rival, as GOC Singapore an automatic member of the Legislative Assembly, should have the right to be called 'His Excellency' which he himself did not, although the frontiers of his own fiefdom of the 'Far East' lay infinitely more distant.

Now one of these gentlemen was chatting with his staff officers near the tennis courts while the other, surrounded by his subordinates, held court near the Orchid House, each still ignorant of the presence at the garden-party of the other. It was clear that it would take a miracle to prevent their meeting. Ah, Mrs Blackett recalled with remorse the rule that she had made many years ago and hitherto strictly observed, to the effect that she would not have military men in her house. In her house! On account of the outbreak of war in Europe she had weakened to the extent of putting a literal interpretation on this rule, allowing them into the garden. How she wished she had not! And now, in addition, it looked as if her daughter were about to make a scene.

Mrs Blackett had been conversing pleasantly with a member of the Legislative Assembly. This gentleman had been describing to her how the Japanese were moving into northern Indo-China and the French were not

resisting. Why weren't they resisting? she had enquired politely, though really more preoccupied with the question of whether Air-Marshal Babington would move into the Orchid Garden. Because, he explained, of pressure on the Vichy Government by the Germans. And then, all of a sudden, Joan had thrown champagne into the face of one of the guests.

'The Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere? What's that?' cried Mrs Blackett in horror. Startled, the gentleman explained that it was in the natue of a propaganda exercise by the Japanese who wanted to establish economic dominion over various countries in the Far East.

'Oh,' said Mrs Blackett, recovering her composure.

Joan for some reason was smiling. She had even been smiling, though rather tensely, as she threw her wine into Captain Ehrendorf's face. There was not, it must be admitted, a great deal left in her glass, but there was enough to rinse his handsome smiling features, collect in drips on his chin and spatter his fawn-coloured uniform with darker spots. He only stopped smiling for a moment and then went on smiling as before, though he looked surprised. He took a handkerchief from his pocket and dried his face carefully, patting with particular attention the thin moustache on his upper lip. With his other hand he took Joan gently by the arm and drew her a little deeper into the blue shadow of the 'flame of the forest' tree beneath which they had been standing. As luck would have it, they had been on the fringe of the lawn and only Mrs Blackett herself appeared to have noticed. Joan shook herself free of Captain Ehrendorf's guiding hand and they came to rest again.

'If you're interested in Indo-China,' said Mrs Blackett brightly but firmly to the gentleman from the Legislative Assembly, 'you must have a word with François Dupigny, who escaped from there only the other day with Général Catroux … and neither of them with a stitch of clothing. You'll find him by the tennis court.' With that, leaving the gentleman looking rather baffled, she moved away towards the 'flame of the forest'.

As she approached, she found Joan and Ehrendorf chatting quite naturally about the band, Sammy and his Rhythmic Rascals, which could be heard playing not far away beside the swimming pool. This band, a daring innovation thought up by her son, Monty, had also caused her some anxiety for she was afraid that it might be thought vulgar. Captain Ehrendorf, the skin around his eyes crinkling into an attractive smile, assured her that it was a great success and that he believed he had even seen General Bond's highly-polished shoe tapping to the rhythm. One thing *was* for sure: the General had moved nearer to the pool … but that might be because he had an eye for the bathing beauties who swooped and tumbled like dolphins in the blue-green water beneath the dais set up for the band; it had been Monty's idea, too, that the physically attractive younger guests should be invited to bathe. Mrs Blackett, aghast, for this was the first intimation she had had that General Bond had left the comparative safety of the Orchid Garden, glanced towards the band whose metal instruments winked with painful brightness in the late afternoon sunlight, to see four Chinese saxophonists in scarlet blazers and white trousers rise as one man from the back row, play a few bars and sink back again. 'I must find Walter quickly,' she thought. At the same time she wondered whether she might not have imagined the scene between Joan and Ehrendorf. But a glance at Ehrendorf's uniform was enough to tell her that she had not: there were still a number of dark spots on the light fabric though they were fading rapidly in the heat.

' "A nightingale sang in Berkeley Square,"' crooned four of the Rhythmic Rascals, their arms on each other's shoulders and their four heads very close to the microphone. ' "I know 'cos I was there …"'

Mrs Blackett noticed with relief that Walter was moving among the guests not far from the pool. 'Are you *sure* people won't find them vulgar?' she asked distractedly, and again the young people were obliged to reassure her.

'She did *what* to Jim Ehrendorf?' demanded Walter a few minutes later. He had left the pool and taken up a vantage point at the balustrade where the twin flights of stone steps met beneath the portico. From here he had been watching sombrely for some time as General Bond and his staff officers like a small flock of sheep, swagger-sticks under their arms, browsed peacefully on cocktails nearer and nearer to where Air-Marshal Babington and his pack of wolves lay in wait by the tennis courts.

'I can see I shall have to give that young lady a talking to!' But Walter's eye remained on the browsing officers below.

Walter, as it happened, knew a little more than most people in Singapore about the cause of friction between the two commanders. The question that separated them was this. How should Malaya be defended and above all, by whom? Air-Marshal Babington, imbued with the fanatical doctrines of the Air Ministry, considered that only the RAF could handle the task. General Bond believed, on the other hand, as any red-blooded Army man would, that rather than trust to aeroplanes, whose effectiveness was conjectural, the Army should deal with the matter. And now, as ill-luck would have it, both sides of this dispute were represented at his garden-party!

'Did you ask her what the devil she thought she was doing, throwing wine at our guests?' demanded Walter with a scowl which also served to discourage the Bishop of Singapore who was smiling his greeting from the lawn below and perhaps contemplating an approach.

'You know how headstrong Joan is. She's highly strung like me.' Mrs Blackett shrugged her shoulders helplessly.

'Singapore's too small to have her carrying on like that,' grumbled Walter. 'Of course, it may not mean anything.' All the same, it was worrying. Why had she done it?

He had gradually come to see that his early fears, lest Joan should insist on marrying someone unsuitable, had been unfounded. She did not readily attach herself to the men who courted her: he need not have worried about the absurd Carlos. Indeed this, he was now beginning to realize, was just the trouble. She had shown herself to be erratic and unpredictable in her dealings with the eligible young men of the Colony of whom there were, in any case, precious few. The truth was that Walter had not been surprised to learn that Joan had thrown champagne into young Ehrendorf's face (not that he was very much more suitable than Carlos had been, agreeable fellow though he was). In the past three years, while she was shedding the last traces of the schoolgirl he loved and was imperceptibly changing into a young adult, there had been a number of incidents, trivial in themselves but collectively disturbing. One lovelorn young planter she had even invited to step fully-dressed into the swimming pool. He had done so but it had not advanced his cause. Undoubtedly, the marriage of a daughter is something to which a great deal of attention must be given, like it or not.

The band had stopped playing for the moment and his wife had left his side to ask the Rhythmic Rascals if they would mind not emptying the saliva from their musical instruments into the swimming pool. A cloud had passed over the sun and though it grew no cooler a momentary chill seemed to affect the garden-party, an ominous sensation which was, perhaps, only in Walter's own mind.

6

Walter, elbows planted on the stone balustrade, chin in hand, gazed moodily down over his chattering guests, half musing on the marriage prospects of his daughter, half hypnotized by the chicken-wire reflections of sunlight on the surface of the pool, still gently heaving although the last of the bathing beauties, wrapped in a bathrobe and escorted by Monty, was already retreating in the direction of the changing pavilion. Walter himself seldom swam, never in public; he was inclined to be sensitive about the ridge of hairs, so thick that they almost amounted to bristles, which for some odd reason had decided to grow over his vertebrae in a thin line stretching from his neck to the base of his spine. These bristles had a tendency to rise when he was angry and sometimes, even, in moments of conjugal intimacy. His wife had once confided in him that every night of their honeymoon she had been visited by a dream in which she had been led by a boar into the depths of a forest; there on a carpet of leaves, marooned in loneliness, she had been mounted by the animal in the grunt-filled silence of the trees. Walter, at the time, had merely shrugged his shoulders, but his feelings had been hurt by his wife's dream. True, he could have enjoyed a swim with his friends if he had consented to wear an old-fashioned swimming costume with neck and sleeves instead of scanty, all-too-revealing shoulder straps. But Walter was sensitive also about his clothing.

A camera clicked. Walter turned away sharply, aware that his photograph had just been taken. He beckoned to a tall, rather anxious-looking man in his fifties who happened to be passing. This man, whose name was Major Brendan Archer, had been introduced to the Blacketts three or four years earlier by the same François Dupigny who had given Walter such valuable advice on how to detach Joan from her unsuitable young man. Major Archer, who though a civilian had kept his rank as a souvenir, Walter supposed, of the Great War, had become friendly with the Blacketts and with old Mr Webb, too. The old gentleman has responded to the Major's air of rather gloomy integrity, had even paid him the unusual compliment of offering him a partnership in the Mayfair Rubber Company, his plaything, though more likely because he wanted someone to talk to than because there was any serious work to be done. The Major, in any event, had presumably had nothing better in mind and presently had been installed in a little bungalow on the other side of the road. Walter approved of this arrangement. The Major was a discreet and sensible fellow, though sadly lacking in ambition. He was just the man to keep an eye on old Mr Webb who was showing signs of becoming increasingly odd as the years advanced. Nor was it simply vegetarianism and a habit of pruning his roses stark naked: Mr Webb now sometimes invited young Chinese of both sexes for nude physical training and gymnastics 'to build up their bodies'. There was nothing sordid or secretive about this, however, although Walter had heard that the few young women whom Mr Webb had managed to conscript had only agreed to build up their bodies as a result of financial incentives. Mr Webb simply believed that if China were ever to rise again and redeem itself from the shattered and decadent nation it had become, it would be thanks to mental and physical alertness and a generous helping of vegetables. Still, it was sad to see him go like this, and unsettling, if only because Mr Webb still owned a considerable proportion of the company's equity. Walter could not be altogether confident that Mr Webb would not make some drastic provisions in his will following the unfortunate estrangement with his son, Matthew. It was worrying. It would have to be watched. The Major would help in the watching.

Walter and the Major began to pace up and down in the shade of the portico discussing the progress of the war in Europe; at the same time Walter kept an eye on his guests in case of trouble. Presently the conversation turned to the Blackett and Webb jubilee celebrations: Walter wanted to involve the Major more deeply in the planning of the carnival parade in which the celebrations would reach their climax. The Major was just the sort of conscientious individual with time on his hands who can usually be relied upon to volunteer for such things, charity balls, picnics in aid of orphans, Buy-a-Bomber-for-Britain Funds and so forth. But today for some reason he seemed reluctant to step forward.

The jubilee of a great merchant house like Blackett and Webb is by no means as easy to celebrate as you might think. The choice of the form the celebrations should take is a delicate matter and certainly it was one which had greatly exercised the minds of Walter and his board of directors. They had tried to find precedents in the business life of Singapore but with little success: such is the penalty for leading the field, you have nobody to imitate. The festivities to mark the royal jubilee in 1935 had been recalled. On that occasion every bank in Singapore had wrapped its pillars in red, white and blue. Even the Yokohama Specie Bank on the corner of Battery Road next to Robinson's, Walter remembered, had been swagged in Union Jacks. For the royal jubilee the RAF had lent a hand: as a demonstration they had bombed and set ablaze a construction on the *padang.* Perhaps the RAF could be persuaded to bomb something for Blackett and Webb?

But in the end these ambitious projects had had to be abandoned, because of the war in Europe. It would hardly have been suitable to hold elaborate celebrations when London shareholders were having to fight for their lives. And so they had been obliged to fall back on garden-parties, fireworks and the carnival parade. It was the latter, it seemed to Walter and his board, which offered most opportunity for doing something out of the ordinary, something which people would remember in Singapore, and which would be, as it were, the apotheosis of trade and the British tradition in the Colony combining for the betterment of all races.

In due course a theme for the parade had been found: 'Continuity in Prosperity'. The Government, harassed by Japanese propaganda to the effect that the white man was exploiting his Asiatic subjects as if they were slaves, had responded enthusiastically and had even ventured to suggest that not only Chinese should take part, but other races too. If a few Europeans were to take part the parade would have less the appearance of a performance by slaves to amuse their masters; nor should the Europeans be confined to regal or magnificent rôles, sitting on thrones and so forth: they should not shrink, if required, from the dusty anonymity of the dragon's feet. It was, however, accepted that if old Mr Webb could be persuaded to take part, he should be carried on the ultimate float sitting on the throne of Prosperity. For who better than Mr Webb, the founder of the company, could personify Continuity in his own bony, dignified frame?

In his mind's eye Walter saw a splendid procession of dragons, effigies and floats representing the commercial successes of Blackett and Webb winding through Chinatown to the thump of brass bands and the crackle of fireworks, then up the hill after dark carrying flaring torches to file past Government House where Sir Shenton Thomas would take the salute from the verandah. A Roman triumph indeed! And yet it had to be admitted that so far the response of those Europeans he had approached to take part in a democratic 'parade of all nations' had not been encouraging. Not that Walter would have expected them to leap at the opportunity … but given the fact that there was a war on, in Europe if not out here, one might have expected a little more support. Walter paused for a moment, having explained this to the Major, in order to give him time to volunteer either for the organizing committee or for the parade itself. But the Major, though he looked oppressed, contented himself with clearing his throat and mutely fingering his moustache.

'Of course, the presence of Europeans in the parade isn't absolutely necessary. We could probably make do with Eurasians, perhaps with chalk on their faces in a pinch. After all, such a parade deals in symbols, not in the real thing. We *do* need Europeans to help in the organization, though.' Again Walter paused and again the Major fingered his moustache and hung back.

'Absolutely indispensable,' declared Walter vigorously, sensing that the Major was weakening.

'Well, I suppose …' the Major began reluctantly. But at this moment he was saved by a Eurasian newspaper reporter in an ill-fitting white suit who presented himself to interview Walter about his firm. Notebook and pencil in hand the reporter, who was from the *Straits Times*, fell into step with the two men as they paced up and down. Walter, abandoning for the moment his pursuit of the Major, began discoursing fluently on the early days of the company.

When Walter had assumed full command of Blackett and Webb in 1930 he had been faced with grave difficulties, given the Depression. He himself believed that it was precisely the catastrophic decline in business activity which had given him the opportunity to display his ability.

'When trade is booming,' he explained, more to the Major than to the reporter, 'anyone can make money for the simple reason that most things you do turn out to be right. It takes a depression to show you what's wrong with your business.'

'Chairman overcomes early snags,' wrote the young man from the *Straits Times* in his notebook without breaking his stride.

Because of the haphazard way in which Blackett and Webb had grown up the complexity of the business which Walter had to prevent from foundering was such as to numb the mind of an ordinary mortal. But Walter made light of it, insisting that his partner's early exploits should be regarded as the firm's golden age. When old Mr Webb had started out in business in 1890 it had been simply as a merchant in tropical produce. Rice, tea, copra, spices, pineapples, even opium had passed through his hands in those early days. And human beings, too, of course, for like everyone else he had shipped coolies from South China to Malaya and Java, usually as deck cargo. But his principal concern had been with the rice trade in Burma. There, thanks to an agreement with the other Rangoon merchants to keep down the prices paid to the peasants, vast profits were to be made. This trade was not without risk, however, what with forward contracts to fill and a limited supply of shipping.

'Varied trade gets firm off to flying start,' scribbled the reporter.

‘Yes, he’s the man you should be talking to,’ declared Walter as his eye fell on old Mr Webb in the distance: he was sitting bolt upright in the shade over by the Orchid Garden, his back still as straight as a ramrod despite his years. Over there the younger executives of Blackett and Webb approached him in turn, evidently according to some rota system of their own, to exchange a few remarks with him. On occasion, when a young man’s name was shouted into his ear, he would reply grimly: ‘Knew your father well.’ And the faintest twinkle would appear in his steely eyes. At a little distance a cadaverous individual with shoulders so rounded that they amounted, at least in Walter’s view, to the beginnings of a hump, was observing these ritual respects with derision from behind a flowering shrub. This was the odious, crafty Solomon Langfield, chairman of the rival firm of Langfield and Bowser Limited. Though Walter could not abide old Langfield he was nevertheless pleased that he had accepted the invitation to attend: evidently Langfield’s curiosity had got the better of his desire to ignore the opening of Blackett and Webb’s jubilee celebrations, which happened to fall a year or two before his own. Having permitted himself to pause for a moment to sample the pleasure of Langfield’s company, Walter returned to the consideration of his former partner, for he was fond of recalling the skill with which old Mr Webb had managed his business in those pioneering days when disaster had seemed always to be just round the corner. In years, for example, when a famine occurred in Bengal, as they did periodically, the peasants in Burma could hold back their crops, secure in the knowledge that the merchants would have to pay what they asked or default on their shipping contracts. Gradually, though, the situation for the merchants had improved. Chettyar moneylenders from India had penetrated the rice-growing delta, entangling the peasants in debt and bringing them to the point where they could no longer hold back their crops for higher prices even when there was a shortage on the market.

At Walter’s side the Major had a gloomy expression. He did not like to hear of people being entangled in debt, even for the best of reasons. But Walter, warming to his task, went on: ‘You see, the Chettyar money-lenders in Burma and, to a lesser extent, here in Malaya, too, acted on the peasants like saddle-soap on leather. They softened them up for us. Of course, some of the Chetties became rivals in the milling of crops but that couldn’t be helped. Without them to get the peasants used to dealing in cash (which, of course, in practice meant tricking them into debts they would have to pay up) rather than in barter of produce the merchants would have all been in the poorhouse, including Mr Webb. One bad crop with forward contracts to fill!’ And Walter made his blue eyes bulge with mock horror.

‘Pliable peasants bring bulls into rice-market!’

‘But that’s dreadful,’ muttered the Major. ‘I mean to say, well, I had no idea …’

It had taken some time before the Burmese peasants were altogether subdued but by about 1893 the Rangoon merchants had their hands on the key that would lock up the market: namely, control of the rice-mills throughout the country.

‘Instantly,’ explained Walter, making a chopping gesture with the flat of his hand, ‘they cut the price of paddy in half. In 1892 they paid 127 rupees: in 1893 only 77 rupees. How’s that for a grip on the market?’

As a result of this forcing down of the price the peasants, ruined by their thousands, had been obliged to leave the land. This was hard luck on the peasants since they had as a rule worked strenuously to clear it from the jungle, but it did have one further advantage, at least for Mr Webb and his fellow merchants. Cheaper methods could now be introduced by the use of seasonal workers, the trusty ‘division of labour’ which, the Major must agree, had conferred such benefits in prosperity on mankind. To put it bluntly, you no longer had to support a man and his family all year round, you could now bring him in to do a specific job like planting or harvesting. The traditional village communities were broken up and the Burmese had to learn to travel about looking for seasonal or coolie work, from the producer’s point of view a much more efficient and much cheaper system. ‘The rice-growing delta had been turned into what someone called “a factory without chimneys”,’ summed up Walter with satisfaction, wondering what ailed the Major who was looking more chagrined than ever.

‘Modern methods increase output. Peasants take to travel.’

‘But that’s tragic,’ burst out the Major unable to contain his indignation. ‘It’s disgraceful.’

Walter, however, paid no attention to him for that had not been the end of the story, by any means. Even in later years problems still used to crop up for the merchants. The Burmese, certainly, had been largely reduced to the status of coolies by the turn of the century, but Indians and Chinese, who understood western business methods better, had taken to setting up their own mills in the interior of the country and milling rice for export, thereby weakening the monopoly of the big European mills in Rangoon. When in 1920 Blackett and Webb and the other European millers tried as usual to keep the price of paddy down they failed and had to pay up (‘Those damned forward sales again!’). So the following year Blackett and Webb had joined the other three main European houses in the notorious Bullinger Pool to harmonize their buying and selling policies.

‘Well, that was nothing new. But someone … don’t ask me who! … used his influence with the railway company to make the freight charges for moving milled rice more expensive than for moving paddy.’ Walter chuckled with pleasure at this recollection of twenty years ago. ‘Result? The mills in the interior could no longer compete with Rangoon in the export trade. We were back on Easy Street!’ The Major muttered inaudibly, clasping his brow.

‘What’s that you say, Major! Complaints? Of course there were complaints! There always are. Nationalists brought it up in the Legislature in 1929. But that was nearly ten years later and when they held an enquiry it

didn't get anywhere. Besides, by that time world prices had collapsed and people had more important things to worry about.'

'Rice sleuths' freight enquiry comes off rails,' scribbled the reporter fluently, stifling a yawn. How had Blackett and Webb come to be involved in rubber? He had to repeat his question because Walter was eyeing his guests to make sure that all was still going smoothly.

The Rhythmic Rascals had started playing once more: this time it was 'Run, Rabbit, Run'. Down below, not far from the pool, one of the browsing military men stiffened for a moment, nose in the air, as if scenting RAF officers on the breeze. But Babington and his men were still safely downwind in the direction of the tennis courts. A moment later he resumed his drinking and chatting, though a shade more warily than before; white-coated waiters passed among the little flock carrying trays of champagne or *pahits*. Joan and Ehrendorf were still standing together, a little way apart from the other guests. Joan had just held out her glass to a waiter carrying a champagne bottle wrapped in a white napkin. Was it Walter's imagination or did Ehrendorf flinch away slightly as she made a move to raise it to her lips?

It was certainly true that rice, explained Walter, turning back to his companions, was only one of many kinds of tropical produce to be handled by Blackett and Webb when the partnership had first been formed. But rubber rapidly became the most important. The years of old Mr Webb's active business life, from about 1880 to 1930, had witnessed a prodigious exporting of capital from Britain to the colonial Empire: this capital's role was to take advantage of the high investment returns attending the plentiful supply of land and, above all, cheap labour in the colonies. Already before the Great War Mr Webb had begun to acquire plantations in order to be sure of a steady supply of the various commodities in which he traded. As it turned out, nobody was in a better position to take advantage of the rubber boom which came with the motor-car than a merchant with a good reputation, like Mr Webb whose integrity was beyond question and whose firm was already accustomed to administering plantations. Such a merchant house, instead of risking its own resources (this was a new industry: demand might fluctuate), could tap that huge reservoir of silver which had accumulated in Britain thanks to the Industrial Revolution and which had since grown stagnant. After that, the firm had grown rapidly. The next years had been spent starting plantations or acquiring those started by other people and floating them in London as rubber companies, using Blackett and Webb's reputation and its participation in the issues to attract investors. In due course, as a result, they had found themselves managing-agents of a considerable number of small rubber companies.

'Expanding rubber boom stretches firm's own resources despite elastic demand!' wrote the reporter, warming to his task.

By the early twenties Blackett and Webb had been in a position to channel business to European companies in return for being made their sole Singapore agents. Shipping lines interested in the freight trade accompanying the rubber boom appointed Blackett and Webb their agents in the Far East. Insurance companies, manufacturers of this and that hoping to find a market in Malaya or the Dutch East Indies, engineering and construction firms looking for contracts … In no time they were agents for all sorts of business radiating from Singapore over a vast area in every direction, a commercial grip on land and labour of enormous potential resources. And everything, except perhaps for pineapples and the entrepôt business, had flourished. Blackett and Webb could look back with satisfaction on their fifty years of service to the community.

'What's your name, son?'

'Malcolm, sir.'

'Well, you're a bright lad, Malcolm,' said Walter with magnanimity. 'Work hard and you'll get on in life.'

'Thank you, sir.'

The music had come to a stop once more. The Rhythmic Rascals, exhausted by their efforts in the humid heat, were sitting back enjoying a rest. Walter had just noticed something rather odd: old Mr Webb, seated by himself in the shade and temporarily deserted by young executives, was no longer sitting bolt upright as was his custom, indeed he was slumped rather pathetically. Could it be that the old fellow had had too much to drink on this day of celebration? But Walter had never known him to touch alcohol. More likely he was simply too tired to make the effort when he was by himself. Still, he should not have been left alone, today especially.

Walter left the Major and was about to join his former partner when he realized that events elsewhere were beginning to take a disastrous course. One of the staff officers had just spoken to General Bond, evidently suggesting that they should go and have a look at the tennis, for the General and his flock began to stride out firmly in that direction. But they were still some yards away when Air-Marshal Babington and his men, clearly having just made a similar decision to visit the Orchid Garden, put in a sudden appearance from behind the hedge. The two rival groups stopped and glared at each other, bristling.

'Oh Lord!' muttered Walter, hurrying to intercept them. But again he was diverted, this time by an urgent shout from one of the servants. He was just in time to see old Mr Webb topple out of his chair and roll over on the lawn. At the same moment the first heavy drops of a providential shower of rain began to patter on the lawn and make rings in the pool, scattering the guests who still had not noticed old Mr Webb. The guests took cover, laughing, leaving Walter and the Major, assisted by some alarmed servants, to carry the old gentleman into the house.

‘Oh no! Not a death as well!’ groaned Mrs Blackett to herself. It was one of those days. Her party had not been a success.

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Was Mr Webb actually dead or not? It was very hard to say at first. The scurrying cortège that was carrying him into the house made its way, in order not to alarm the other guests, behind the refreshment tent which had been set up on the lawn. From there it made a quick dash for a side door normally used by the servants. Mr Webb’s body was extraordinarily light despite its length: the old capitalist was really nothing but skin and bone. The Major had surrendered his share of it to one of the ‘boys’ and hurried ahead to telephone for an ambulance.

Returning presently to the drawing-room he found that Mr Webb, who was after all still breathing, had been laid horizontal on a sofa which by chance stood so close to the vertical portrait of himself that the heavy shoes he was wearing came within a few inches of the identical shoes in the painting. This coincidence gave the Major the curious feeling that he was looking at a toy soldier that had just fallen over. He rejected this impression immediately, however, and filled with concern, for he was genuinely fond of the old man, he hastened forward to where Walter was unlacing the three-dimensional shoes with respect and taking them off the ancient feet. The Major, determined to be helpful, loosened the old gentleman’s stiff collar and then hurried away once more to see if he could find a doctor among the guests.

Presently, though, an ambulance arrived and events took their course. The old fellow had had a serious stroke and was not expected to survive for very long. Walter gloomily rejoined the garden-party. It was not worth sending people home, even if he had had a mind to: they were beginning to go already. By half-past seven the garden was quiet. The ‘boys’ had finished the task of clearing up after the guests, the caterers had struck their tents, the band had moved on to its evening assignment. Where the rest of his family had got to, Walter had no idea. He suspected his wife had gone to lie down in her bedroom. Having told one of the ‘boys’ to send Joan to him, he himself retired to brood in his dressing-room from where he had a view over the now peaceful garden.

This tiny, high-ceilinged room was the one place, his family and servants knew, where he must never be disturbed without permission, for it was here perched on the arm of an old leather armchair by the window that he did his thinking. This habit of sitting always in the same place had given the dull leather that covered the chair a deep polish on the arm nearest the window. Teak drawers with gleaming brass fittings, their size according to whether they contained shirts, or collars, or handkerchieves, rose in tiers around him. Beside the door in an alcove stood a vast Edwardian washbasin, also with brass fittings and so deep, so capacious that one could have bathed a spaniel, say, or a child in it, submerging them without difficulty.

Now that the garden-party had come to its sad end Walter had a good deal to brood over and not much time in which to do it. Soon more guests would be arriving, or at least he supposed that they would, unless they were forestalled by news of Mr Webb’s stroke. Below in the dining-room eighty places had been laid in silver cutlery on a glistening white table-cloth. A dinner-party had been organized as a preview of Blackett and Webb’s jubilee celebrations, to mark the opening of the campaign, as it were, which would reach its climax in the great parade scheduled for New Year’s Day 1942. To this party the innermost circle of Singapore’s business and governmental community had been invited to offer their congratulations to himself and, in particular, to old Mr Webb whose birthday it was. Walter had instructed his secretary to telephone as many of the dinner-guests as he could find, cancelling the engagement. But undoubtedly at this last minute it would be impossible to locate them all. Well, so much the worse. Those who came would be received and fed. If there were only a few he could leave Monty to take care of them. It would be good practice for him.

Walter gazed out at the insects swirling around the lights by the swimming pool, listening to the tropical night which like some great machine turning over had begun its humming, whirring and clicking, steadily growing in volume as the darkness deepened. And as he listened, he brooded, not on his partner’s imminent death (he would think about that presently) but on his daughter’s marriage. Walter was considered, and considered himself, fond of his children. But the truth was that he had been disappointed when, after a promising start with Monty, his wife had given him only two daughters, Joan and little Kate. If he had had more sons what could he not have done with Blackett and Webb! He loved his daughters, of course, but he had always assumed them to be a liability. And he had been unable to prevent himself making a bitter comparison between his own family and the Firestones’. It seemed to him perfectly unjust that Harvey Firestone should not only have set up such an effective business but should, in addition, have engendered five energetic sons in his own image with which to expand it. At one time Walter had entertained kindly thoughts of the Firestones and had even sent an occasional Christmas card to their family farm in Ohio. But relations between producers and manufacturers had been soured by the international rubber restriction agreement set up by the British and Dutch rubber producers to stabilize the price. Firestone and the American consumers had launched a political counter-attack … and now, though there was already too much of the stuff being grown, they had put great areas of Liberia under rubber! What could you do with such people!

‘Harvey’s trouble was that he was drunk with his own power and just because he used to go camping with

the President, who was only a flea-bitten politician anyway!'

Sons are an asset, daughters a liability. This had always been, in Walter's view, axiomatic. But there remained, nevertheless, one time-honoured way in which a daughter could prove an asset: namely, by her marriage. By a judicious match she could accomplish more, at one stroke, than any number of sons might accomplish in a lifetime. What might not have been achieved if Joan had appealed to one of the young Firestones? Walter shrugged the thought away dejectedly: he must not torment himself with such fantasies.

In the past three years a considerable change had come over Joan. She had grown more mature. Above all, she had come to take a serious interest in the business, much more interest than Monty, as it happened. On one or two occasions when Walter had been in need of assistance in some delicate and confidential matter which he did not care to reveal even to his closest colleagues, Joan had done useful work for him, showing a natural grasp of the important issues which he could not help but find gratifying. A sense of reality had come to replace the romantic nonsense she had brought back from her finishing school. Walter now dared to hope that she would no longer find a marriage soundly based on commercial logic quite so distasteful. What worried him, though, was this throwing of wine into young men's faces and invitations to them to step fully-clothed into swimming pools. Nor, it must be admitted, had she as yet shown much interest in the right sort of young man … or old man, for that matter.

There had, Walter reflected as he left his seat by the window and began dressing for a dinner which he hoped would not take place, only been one merchant's son who had appeared to take her fancy. That had been young Langfield of Langfield and Bowser Limited, heir to a merchant house neither bigger nor smaller than Blackett and Webb. You might wonder who could have been more suitable. Not so. The Langfields were the one family in business in the Straits with whom Walter would have no dealings (none, at least, that he could decently avoid, for he found himself obliged now and then to sit with a Langfield on this or that Government committee). What jubilation there would be among the Langfields when they learned of the disastrous outcome of the garden-party! It had been reported back to Walter that they had already been at work in Singapore insidiously suggesting that there was something vulgar about starting jubilee celebrations more than a year before the date of commemoration. Walter's brows gathered at the thought of the unctuous, salt-rubbing letter of regret which he would receive from old Solomon Langfield in the morning. The old fox was probably hunched over it at this very moment, savouring its hypocritical phrases. He tugged angrily at the butterfly wings of his tie and the knot shrank to the size of a pebble. There was a knock on the door and Joan came in.

'You wanted to see me?' She stopped short at the sight of her father's scowling face, and then came forward and took his arm: 'Poor Daddy, you must be upset about Mr Webb. I forgot what a blow it must be after all these years.'

'Eh? What? Oh yes, of course, it does come as a bit of a shock. He was certainly a fine man and the place won't seem the same without him. Not that he's dead yet, of course. Hm, but that's not why I wanted to see you, Joan … What's this your mother tells me about you throwing wine at Jim Ehrendorf?'

Joan smiled. 'Has Mother been making a fuss? It was nothing. Really. He was just getting on my nerves. I'd already forgotten about it.'

'But he's a nice fellow,' said Walter, looking at his daughter in surprise. 'Everyone likes him, even though he *is* American. And he's the least *American* American I know. And there's no one more cultured and with better manners. I can't see why you want to throw wine in his face.'

Joan looked out of the window for a moment with a sly, half malicious, half amused expression on her face which Walter had not seen before. She shrugged. 'I don't know why, myself. I suppose I wanted to see what he would do, whether he would get angry or something. He didn't, of course. He's always so reasonable.' She added with a laugh: 'Even if I kicked his shins he still wouldn't do anything, except perhaps look rather pained and forgiving.'

'Well, please don't kick his shins at my garden-parties, or do anything else to him, if it comes to that. We have a position to keep up in Singapore. Promise?'

Joan nodded and smiled, peering curiously at her father at the same time, or rather at his neck. 'What have you done to your tie, Daddy? It looks most peculiar. Here, let me tie it again for you. I'm expert at tying men's bow-ties. I've had to practise so much on Monty.'

'All right, but I shall sit down if you don't mind.' He held his chin up, gazing at the ceiling while Joan's fingers played deftly about his neck. 'There was something else I wanted to mention. Have you seen Miss Chiang recently? Does she still have a room at the Mayfair? I meant to ask the Major.'

Vera Chiang was the Eurasian girl whom Joan had seen arrested by the Japanese in Shanghai three years earlier and then met again on the boat to Singapore. Nothing had been heard of her for a couple of years during which Joan had wondered idly once or twice what had become of her … but after all she was just another tiny drop in the flood of Chinese immigrants, legal and illegal, who had been pouring into the Straits Settlements now for three decades. Then some nine months earlier Walter had been visited at his office on Collyer Quay by an official of the Chinese Protectorate. A young Eurasian woman, picked up in connection with the General Labour Union-inspired strike at the Singapore Harbour Board and faced with a deportation order, had given his name and Joan's as credentials. As there was no direct evidence to implicate her personally with the Communist-infiltrated General Labour Union's subversive campaign, and as the name of

Blackett carried considerable weight in the Colony, it had been decided not to proceed with the deportation order if the Blacketts were prepared to vouch for her.

Walter had little appetite for vouching for people, even former employees: at best, it was a waste of time, at worst, a source of future trouble. Moreover, he himself did not know the girl and Joan had long since lost interest in her. Above all, he had a great deal of work to do and, as ill luck would have it, old Mr Webb had chosen that particular day to make one of his rare ceremonial visits to Collyer Quay and for the past hour had been sitting in Walter's office, wasting his valuable time. If Walter had been by himself he would have dismissed the matter in a moment: as it was, for form's sake and the benefit of Mr Webb who seemed to be taking an interest in it, Walter had felt obliged to ask if anything else was known about her. Not a great deal, it transpired. She had been the friend or concubine of a Communist sympathizer, deported the year before to an uncertain fate at Chungking; despite the rapprochement between the Communist and the Kuomintang he had most likely been done away with by the latter. Since then Miss Chiang had been scraping a living as a taxi-dancer or, more likely, as a casual prostitute and bar-girl, not a profitable profession to follow these days. The most suspicious thing about Miss Chiang, the man from the Protectorate had declared becoming voluble and oddly intense ('Who on earth is this chump and why must he come and waste my time?' Walter asked himself sourly), was that she was extremely well-educated and spoke excellent English! Walter, who had heard enough, had risen impatiently to escort the fellow to the door, saying that, in the circumstances, he did not think…

Walter had been conscious for some time that Mr Webb was shifting uneasily in his chair but at this point the old chap had suddenly burst out in anger: 'And why shouldn't she be educated? Eh? Tell me that! How will the Chinese ever pull themselves together unless they build up their minds and bodies? Tell me! And you can stop grinning like that, too. I was in this Colony before you were born!'

The old man had stood up, white with anger. The man from the Protectorate, taken aback by this sudden outburst, muttered : 'When they're educated it can mean that they're Comintern agents, that's all I meant,' but at the same time his eyes had narrowed suspiciously, as if he were wondering whether Mr Webb, too, might not be a Comintern agent.

'Well, I shall vouch for her if Blackett won't! Here's my card. Webb's the name. Send her to me if she needs a job. I'll give her one. And another thing, any more impertinence and I shall be in touch with your superior. The first thing you have to learn is to take your hands out of your pockets when you are talking to someone.' With that, Mr Webb had stalked out of the office, leaving the man from the Protectorate, (whose name was Smith, it turned out) with his hands half out of his pockets, licking his lips in an odd sort of way, and grinning at Walter. And that had been that.

Vera Chiang, reprieved, had taken up residence with Mr Webb at the Mayfair. Her duties there were vague: most likely she helped her employer to hire destitute young women whose bodies needed building up. She certainly gave English lessons for on one occasion Major Archer, taking an unsuspecting stroll through the compound of the Mayfair, had come upon her giving instruction to a small, naked class in the use of the verbs 'to do' and 'to make', so he had informed Walter. He had beaten a hasty retreat, needless to say. Strangely enough, despite her past reputation and present employment the Major had taken a liking to her, and so had Mr Webb, though he had never mentioned her name in Walter's presence. As for Joan, though she had visited Miss Chiang once or twice and brought her some of her own clothes which she no longer needed, it would have been difficult for her as a European to become the bosom friend of a Eurasian girl, however well-educated. Such friendships were considered unsuitable in the social climate of Singapore. By a curious coincidence her clothes fitted Miss Chiang to perfection without the least alteration, and Joan had been startled to see how pretty she looked in them. Even Walter, seeing a familiar blue and green dress and a young woman posting a letter at the corner of the road, had slowed his car to give his daughter a lift, only to accelerate muttering to himself a moment later. Walter, in any case, could not have permitted Joan to be friendly with Miss Chiang, given her dubious relationship with Mr Webb.

All this time Joan had been prevented from answering his question by the fact that the moist, pink tip of her tongue was firmly gripped between her strong white teeth, an outer sign of the mental concentration required to tie a bow-tie on the neck of another person, particularly when the tie was of modest length and the neck, like Walter's, resembled the bole of an oak. At last she had finished, however.

'I haven't seen her for some time but I think she's still living there.'

'The point is,' said Walter, going to the mirror to inspect her handiwork, 'that we don't want a young woman of that sort turning up at Mr Webb's hospital bedside. You know how people gossip. If necessary we might have to consider giving her some money to stay out of the way. This, my dear, is a beautiful job!'

8

Walter slowly descended the stairs, brooding again on Harvey Firestone's skill in engendering male babies. How on earth did he do it? Pausing with his hand on the banister, Walter experienced that unnerving feeling which no other businessman had ever produced in him of being outclassed. Not three or four, but five! That was luck of a very high order … or no, not just luck, it was … how could one put it? … from the business

point of view, *correct behaviour*, a mixture, very hard to define, of luck, certainly, in large part but also of opportunism, skill and rightness. Walter had been almost overpowered on the occasion of his first visit to Akron, Ohio, by this sensation of *the right thing being done* at high intensity all around him, and not only in the production of male babies but in that of motor tyres and rims, too. Perhaps it was just as well that he and Firestone were on opposite ends of the rubber business.

Walter sank a few more steps and paused again, his mood of self-doubt having passed. Rubber these days was in demand in a way it had never been before. This was, to some extent, thanks to the war and to the fact that the British and American governments were trying to acquire reserve stocks against a breakdown in supplies. But above all it was due to the determination of a few men, Walter among them, who had argued that rubber producers *could* and *must* agree to limit the amount of rubber they released to the market. There was no other answer (except ruin). His brow, which had furrowed like a stormy sea at the thought of Harvey Firestone, returned to more placid undulations as he recalled how the doubters had argued that it had been tried before (they meant the Stevenson scheme from 1922–8) and had failed. Walter had not been daunted. The Netherlands East Indies, the only country to come close to Malaya in rubber production, had not agreed to take part in the Stevenson scheme so of course it had failed. This time the NEI must be made to see reason. They had vast areas of rubber smallholdings; nobody, not even the Dutch administration knew their extent. With all this rubber about to reach maturity and start flooding the market the entire rubber business could collapse. It was obvious that a reasonable price would have to be maintained artificially by a cartel of producers or rubber would become worthless. So Walter and his allies had argued against the doubters, who included, needless to say, old Solomon Langfield, and in the end they had won.

Under the new scheme (somehow Langfield had wormed his way on to the assessment committee despite his earlier opposition) an estimated annual production was established for each country: for Malaya, for the NEI, Indo-China and the other smaller producers. Then an international committee was set up to decide, quarter-yearly, what percentage of the total rubber production of all these countries might be released to the world market without risking a drop in price because there was too much of it about. As a result it had become possible to allot a specific tonnage of rubber to each country and declare that this quarter they might export so much and no more.

Think of this rubber not as the solid elastic sheets resembling bundles of empty flour sacks in which it was actually exported but as the milky latex in which, very slowly, it seeps out of the trees. Walter and his fellow-producers now had a tap in the shape of the restriction scheme with which they could control the flow of latex on to the market. Around this tap were gathered the thirsty manufacturers of the industrial nations, and none more parched than the men from the American motor-tyre industry, the Goodyears, the Goodriches and, of course, the Firestones. Open the tap and they would drink their fill, splashing about as if latex were as worthless as water. Close it, though, and you would soon see their lips begin to crack and their tongues to swell. Let them get thirsty enough and they would not mind what they paid.

Walter had watched the manipulation of the tap with interest. In the years following the Depression demand for rubber had been slack. But by 1936, thanks to an increase in motorcar production and a miserly hand controlling the flow, the price of rubber had begun to rise and there had been a boom in rubber shares. At the end of that year the manufacturers had croaked a request for the producers to release a higher percentage in the coming year. The Restriction Committee had maintained its strict hand on the tap, however, and when criticized by the Americans for the rubber shortage in 1937, had artfully replied that even if it had raised the percentage released there would still not have been any more rubber available. Why not? The manufacturers had been floored by this paradox. Well, because there was a shortage of labour for one thing. For another, from February to April is when the trees are 'wintering' and production always falls. For those who knew the rubber business this was not very convincing but never mind, it would serve.

Walter had now reached the bottom of the stairs and the last traces of scowl had disappeared, giving way to an expression of beatitude. For when the restriction scheme had been set up it had been understood that available rubber stocks should not be allowed to fall below the equivalent of five months' absorption by the manufacturers: this was in order that their businesses, and a possible expansion of demand, should not be put in jeopardy by shortages or delays in supply. And, mind you, the official policy of the Restriction Committee was not to make a killing out of rubber but merely to ensure, in a silky phrase worthy of Solomon Langfield himself, 'a reasonable return to an efficient producer'. It had come as no surprise to anyone in Singapore, least of all to Walter, when stocks fell below the promised five months' absorption and the price began to rise. Presently, the Committee's idea of what represented 'a reasonable return' began to rise, too. Seven pence a pound, eight pence, nine pence … The scheme was working. Walter had watched, enthralled. Standing at the foot of the stairs he suddenly flourished his fist in the air. That had been one on the nose for the Firestones!

Walter, returning to his senses, now realized that Abdul, his Malay major-domo, had approached silently and was eyeing him with concern.

'What news, Master?'

'Good news, Abdul,' replied Walter conventionally. The fellow clearly wanted to tell him something. He bent an ear.

'A *what*, Abdul? A yogi?' Walter stared in amazement at the elderly Malay who had been in his service for some years and for whom he felt a considerable affection and respect.

The major-domo explained. The yogi had come to entertain the guests. It was the idea of the young *Tuan* Blackett.

'Well, tell the bloody man to go away again. It's supposed to be a dinner-party, not a circus.'

'Yes, *Tuan*.' The old man smiled faintly for there was a bond of sympathy between him and Walter when it came to the behaviour of the younger generation and it was clear that he, no less than Walter, had found the idea of a yogi at a dinner-party outrageous.

'But no, wait, Abdul. On second thoughts we must let Monty make his own decision about the yogi. He'll never learn if we always have to tell him what's what. I shall let him take charge of the dinner-party this evening. There probably won't be more than a dozen guests or so and they can be served in the breakfast-room. Tell him, will you, that I won't appear until after they've eaten. I've work to do.' And as the old servant was leaving Walter added: 'The boy must learn by his own mistakes, Abdul. There's no other way, I'm afraid, no other way.'

Alone in his study Walter was once more preoccupied with his family, this time with his son. Monty had energy and he worked hard. He had done a good job in reorganizing the administration of their estates when business was expanding again after the Depression. He was doing a good job now of pushing through the replanting, very often against opposition from estate managers who could not see the logic of it when rubber was booming. He even had some business sense which, with experience, might be developed. But the boy was erratic, there was no other word for it. Every now and then he would produce some wild idea that made you wonder whether he had understood anything at all. A yogi to entertain at supper on a day like this! True, he had not known that Mr Webb would collapse, but all the same! And they had barely recovered from the Chinese band he had insisted on having at the garden-party.

Moreover, Monty was no longer, strictly speaking, a boy. He was thirty. If he were ever going to learn by his mistakes it was high time that he started. Walter could not help comparing him, unfavourably, with a photograph he had once seen of the five young Firestones, each one as neatly brushed, as smartly turned out in his identical dark suit as his four brothers. And each one, no doubt, with a perfect command of that day's *Wall Street Journal.* You would not catch the young Firestones inviting fakirs to dinner-parties.

Monty had certain good qualities but he was seriously lacking in judgement. Perhaps this would not have mattered if it had been merely a question of the occasional bizarre idea for amusing guests, but alas, it was not. In 1936 Monty had been sent to take charge of the London office for a few months to learn the European side of the business and, while he was there, he had got Blackett and Webb involved in something that anyone with common sense would have avoided. Towards the end of that year Monty had lent the authority of the firm to a great wave of speculation which was being generated by the rubber dealers and brokers in Mincing Lane. Mincing Lane's market analysts, peering into the swirling mists of the future, had perceived not only an approaching shortage of rubber but, stretching beyond that shortage, higher prices as far as the eye could see (that is what they said they had perceived, anyway). The brokers' market reports were in little doubt, they declared, but that the Restriction Committee had decided on maintaining higher prices indefinitely; after all, it could make little difference to the manufacturers who would simply pass the increases on to their customers. And even if the Committee had *not* decided on a higher price it was well known, in Mincing Lane if not in Malaya, that not enough rubber could be produced to meet higher percentage rates of release. Besides, there was a shortage of labour. Besides, it was well known that once the native smallholders, who produced almost half of Malaya's rubber, made a little money, as they would with present high prices, they had the amiable habit of downing tools instead of pressing home their advantage, preferring to doze the day away in hammocks. So, one way or another, a shortage of rubber was inevitable. There was a quick fortune to be made.

Well, promotion of this sort, designed to make your mouth water, is what one must expect of a commodity broker. After all, such a fellow has to make a living somehow and Walter was the last person to hold that against him. But a steady market is not much good to a broker: he wants prices to rise or fall (he does not mind which provided they do one or the other). And if the market declines to fluctuate of its own accord it must be encouraged to do so. A cold night in Brazil and frost has wiped out the coffee plantations. A high wind in Jamaica and it's goodbye to bananas. Fair enough. Walter did not expect the commodity broker to emerge clad in different stripes simply because he was dealing in rubber. But for Monty to give Blackett and Webb's support to such devious special pleading struck Walter as so foolish as almost to amount to the work of an imbecile. Perhaps he had made some money for himself from a judicious trading of rubber shares, yes, perhaps even a large amount, though, if so, he had evidently lost it again gambling. But that was not what he was there for. Fluctuating markets do not help producers because an artificial boom brings with it inevitably its dark shadow, a collapse. And a collapse in prices brings for more difficulties for the producer that the boom earlier brought advantages. But what really angered Walter was something different, something even less tangible. It was the damage which had been done to Blackett and Webb's good name.

Walter got to his feet and stretched wearily. A murmur of voices from another part of the house told him that Monty's guests had arrived. He hoped that the boy would behave in a suitably subdued manner, given the circumstances. Presently, he himself would have to put in a brief appearance. 'Poor old Webb!' he thought as he settled down at his desk and began to read through the bundle of cables which had been steadily collecting on it all afternoon in his absence. But as he sat there, deep below the surface of his working mind, a

disturbing thought shifted imperceptibly once or twice. To whom would Mr Webb leave his share of the business?

After an hour he felt hungry and remembered that he had had nothing to eat since mid-day. The clink of cutlery and cheerful conversation came to him faintly from the breakfast-room. It was clear that not everyone was allowing Mr Webb's approaching end to weigh on his spirits. Reluctant to join this cheerful gathering he made his way towards the dining-room, thinking that perhaps there might still be some food set out there.

Entering the dining-room he received a shock, for the servants, evidently uncertain as to the evening's arrangements, had left the room exactly as it was. The long table was still set with eighty places in silver cutlery. Bowls of flowers and silver candlesticks alternated from one end to the other while at each place there stood a little family of wine glasses in which toasts would have been drunk to Mr Webb on his birthday, to himself, to the firm's future prosperity. But what had given Walter such a shock were the four life-size heads fashioned of cake and icing-sugar, crude but recognizable, which had been set up on side tables, one in each corner of the room. Two of the heads he recognized immediately: one was of himself, benign, dew-lapped, cheeks unnaturally rouged with cochineal, the scalp tonsured with white icing-sugar. The other, more lifelike, represented old Mr Webb's gaunt and dignified features. It seemed to Walter that a cold, almost cynical smile hovered about his former partner's lips, and for a moment he found himself believing that real thoughts might be passing through the fruit-cake brain behind those piercing pale-blue eyes of sugar, that he was thinking: 'So! You thought you had got rid of me at last!'

Recovering from his surprise Walter advanced smiling to read a sugar inscription which announced that these cakes had been presented on the occasion of Mr Webb's birthday and the inauguration of the firm's jubilee celebrations by Blackett and Webb's Chinese employees who had collected subscriptions for the purpose, perhaps, Walter surmised, with the tactful encouragement of the publicity department but nevertheless … This was unexpected and gratifying, given the troubled labour situation in the Colony. And to think that only a few weeks earlier all work in the rubber godowns had come to a halt and Singapore had trembled on the verge of a General Strike! 'Now who are these other chaps?'

One was clearly intended to be Churchill, but a Churchill with slanting eyes and an Oriental look, manifestly the work of a Chinese pastry-cook. It took him a moment longer to recognize the fourth head, thin-featured, high-cheekboned, facing Churchill diagonally across the room but eventually he realized that it must be Chiang Kai-shek. How patriotic the overseas Chinese remained and, considering everything, how well organized!

In the past three years while the Sino-Japanese war had continued to boom and crash like a distant thunderstorm here and there over the mainland there had been a great multiplication of so-called 'Anti-Enemy Backing-up Societies', not all of them, alas, controlled by the Kuomintang. Sinister letters by courier from Shanghai to the Malayan Communist Party had been intercepted (according to the Combined Intelligence Summary), declaring that 'a victorious war for China will be the overture for an emancipation movement in the colonies.' A memorandum from the Special Branch of the Straits Settlements Police warned against the influence these patriotic societies might acquire with the Malayan Chinese, thanks to their anti-Japanese stand. In appearance, harmlessly engaged in collecting funds to support the Chinese army, many of these 'National Salvation' and 'anti-enemy' organizations were in fact under the control of the Communists.

Finding no other food in the dining-room and unwilling to interrupt his train of thought by summoning one of the 'boys', Walter broke off one of Mr Webb's ears and munched it, pacing up and down. How many of his own employees who had perhaps subscribed to these effigies in cake of hated imperialists were at the same time secret members of, say, the Overseas Chinese Anti-Enemy National Salvation Society or of the even more outlandishly named Youth Blood and Iron Traitor-Exterminating Corps (the latter, to be sure, thought not to be Communist-led and, despite its bloodcurdling title, specializing in nothing more violent than the occasional tarring of a shop in the city for selling scrap-iron to the Japanese), not to mention more conventional gangs like the Heaven and Earth Society? Walter found it disturbing to know so little of where the real allegiance of his employees might lie. 'Not with us, anyway! Or only when it suits them.' The strikes which throughout this summer of 1940 had caused the foundations of the Colony to shake were, moreover, only a local manifestation of an ominous awakening of labour throughout the Far East. Shanghai at this very moment was in the embrace of a transport strike which, as it grew, scattered pollen far and wide. First, the British-owned Shanghai Tramways Company, then the China General Omnibus Company had stopped work. Pollen had been carried on the wind from the International Settlement into the French Concession to fertilize workers of the Compagnie Française de Tramways et d'Eclairage Electrique de Shanghai.

'And the next thing you know they're all at it!' One of the cables which Walter had glanced at a few minutes earlier brought news of a meeting organized by the Shanghai General Labour Union on the 27th at which some ninety-odd unions had been represented. The rubber workers' union, the restaurant workers' union, the weaving and spinning workers' union, the bean sauce workers' union, the silk filature workers' union, the ordure coolies' union, the wharf coolies' union … and so on and so on. Shanghai, despite its almost incredibly precarious political situation, was important to Blackett and Webb. But Walter was more worried by the general implications of the strikes, for where Shanghai led, the rest of the Far East had a habit of following. Admittedly, workers in Shanghai were in real desperation. All the same Walter did not doubt but that the pollen could be carried across the South China Sea to Malaya and Singapore.

Walter halted in his pacing: again he was aware of a cold, cynical, even bitter expression on the icing-sugar features of his former partner, as if that fruit-cake brain were now thinking: 'This would never have happened in my day!' Well, that was true enough. Malaya's gigantic labour force had been docile in the old man's day when there were always ships to be seen anchoring in the roads crammed every available inch with wretched, fermenting, indentured coolies. In those days there was always cheap labour to be had. It had been the Depression which in the end, here as elsewhere, had brought about a change. Faced with great numbers of unemployed among the Chinese the Government had spent some millions of dollars in repatriating them to China: this display of munificence had been generated by the shrewd calculation that the cost of relief would be even greater if they remained in Malaya. But it had not done the employers any good.

In 1933 the Aliens Ordinance had dealt another blow to the business community for it gave the Governor the power to limit the number of aliens landed in the Colony. Although the intention had been more to check the arrival of Communist subversives from the mainland than to limit the size of the labour reservoir, this had proved, nevertheless, to be its effect. The cost of recruiting in China plus an increase in shipping fares had made it less expensive to recruit *free* workers locally than to ship those cargoes of *indentured* coolies. The Indian Government in the meantime, in the belief that Malayan businessmen were exploiting its subjects, had taken steps to limit the flow of Indian workers into the country.

The result? Strikes had begun to break out in Malaya and the Straits Settlements with increasing frequency. The supply of cheap labour had become finite. Many of the estate workers and squatters on pineapple plantations, hitherto isolated from their fellow-workers, had managed to acquire cheap Japanese bicycles: now meetings of widely dispersed workers could be held and collective resistance to low wages had become possible.

'And we didn't even have the wit to sell them the bloody bicycles!' reflected Walter with a wry smile at Mr Webb's effigy.

There had been another development, too. Chinese women, deprived of employment by the collapse of the silk industry in China and not subject to the limitation of the Aliens Ordinance, had begun to arrive by the shipload, whereas before the Depression, apart from women imported by brothel-keepers to stock their establishments, there had been few or none. The result was a sudden sinking of roots. Women had begun to take the cooking and buying of food out of the hands of the Chinese labour-contractors. The workers, who had once been easily abused nomads drifting from one estate or tin-mine to another, had started to settle down and demand the rights of citizens. Old Mr Webb's almond-paste lips might well curl in contempt at the way his younger partner had allowed the initiative to pass to his employees but could he himself have done anything to prevent it?

One of the first strikes, though isolated, had been the most serious of all. In the winter of 1935 Communist miners had taken possession of a coal mine at Batu Arang and set up a soviet to administer it. A soviet in the middle of British Malaya, if you please! Walter had been staggered to hear of it. Of course, it had not lasted long. Even if the Batu Arang mine had not been crucial for electricity and the railway it could not have been allowed to remain as an example to the rest of Malaya's labour force. The police had wasted no time in storming and recapturing it. But the miners' rash action (how naïve they must have been to think that they would get away with it!) had been like a sudden gust of wind which fills the air with thistledown and strips the dandelion of its whiskers. In due course, given time for germination, strikes had begun to spring up all around. Next year it had been the turn of the pineapple factories. The year after that they had spread for the first time to the rubber estates. And what could the old man have done to prevent it? Not a thing.

'Times have changed. That's what the old chap never wanted to see. He thought everything should continue the way it always had. But times have changed, for all that.'

Again that shadow stirred in the depths of his mind: to whom would Mr Webb leave his holdings in the business? 'A businessman must move with the times,' said Walter aloud. And breaking off Mr Webb's other ear, in the interests of symmetry as much as of appetite, Walter departed in search of Monty and his guests, crunching it between his strong yellow teeth as he went.

9

Walter could hear no sound as he made his way along the passage to the breakfast-room and his hopes began to rise. The room, indeed, proved to be deserted, although aromatic cigar smoke still hung in the air. Could it be that the guests had taken their leave already, as a mark of respect to old Mr Webb? If that was the case, then so much the better; Walter was weary after the day's difficulties. But one of the 'boys' clearing the table undeceived him. The party had moved outside to watch the yogi demonstrate his talents. Walter followed them, cracking his knuckles. 'Let the young fool learn by his mistakes then!'

Stepping grimly out of the luxuriously refrigerated air of the house into the sweltering night Walter found that a little herd of guests, men in white dinner-jackets, women in long evening dresses, had collected on that same portico from which, earlier in the day, he had surveyed the progress of the garden-party. On each side flights of stone steps, glimmering white in the darkness, dropped in zigzags to the lawn on which, directly beneath the balustrade, a platform on wooden trestles had been set up for the yogi's performance. Two

powerful floodlights smoking with insects had been directed down on the yogi from above. From behind the lights the guests watched him uneasily. Walter passed among them, shaking hands and responding with a few grave words to their expressions of regret over the collapse of Mr Webb. It was true, of course, he muttered, that the old gentleman had had a good innings. Still, one could not help feeling that it was the end of an era. Walter's words, replete with the quiet dignity which the situation demanded, were unfortunately accompanied by a strange descant from below, some monotonous rigmarole in a language no one could understand, spattered from time to time with incomprehensible English. Really, it was perfectly unsuitable and ludicrous.

Monty suddenly came springing up the steps from the lawn where he had evidently been making some final arrangements. He was rubbing his hands together violently and chuckling in anticipation. Walter's heart sank at the sight of him: the boy had such a wild look.

'There you are, Father. I was just going to get you. I was afraid you might miss this fellow. He's really a scream. He does the most amazing things.'

Walter drew his son to one side and said quietly: 'I want you to get this over as quickly as possible. I very much doubt whether it was ever a good idea, but to carry on with it this evening in view of what has happened to Mr Webb, really, you must have lost your senses.'

'Oh, look here, Father …' protested Monty.

But Walter went on, ignoring him: 'I should have thought that the merest common sense would have told you … And what d'you think the Langfields will say when they hear about it? They'll waste no time in putting it around that the Blacketts have been dancing on Mr Webb's grave while the body is still warm!'

Walter, becoming excited, had spoken louder than he had intended and the bristles on his spine had puffed up beneath his shirt … One or two of the guests had begun to show signs of concern at this sudden whispered altercation between father and son. Walter realized that even Monty was looking at him oddly. 'Anyway, get rid of the fellow as soon as you can,' he said sharply.

Monty stiffened. The chanting had stopped. 'OK, Father. Yeah, OK!' he muttered and slid away swiftly towards the balustrade beneath which the yogi was now beginning to demonstrate his powers. Walter continued to pass among the guests, conversing gravely with them as if something unsuitable were not happening, or about to happen, just out of sight beneath the portico. And while he conversed he mused grimly again on the damage done to the firm by Monty's erratic hand in its affairs, for was it not fair to say that the labour trouble on the estates in 1937 had stemmed, indirectly at least, from that great speculative rubber boom which Monty and the London office, in concert with certain unscrupulous brokers of Mincing Lane, had whipped up in the autumn of 1936 with their predictions of a rubber scarcity lasting as far as the eye could see?

Well, the truth of the matter was simple: the swift rise in the price of rubber, and of the employers' profits, had not, unfortunately, gone unnoticed by the Chinese work-force. There had been complaints about low wages in Selangor and Negri Sembilan. On the Bangi estate in Ulu Langat the manager had tried to get rid of his Chinese workers and replace them with Javanese. In no time the workers on half a dozen estates had downed tools. Moreover, other districts soon began to join because the workers from the Connemara estate, who had drawn up a list of demands for the Protector of Chinese, were fanning out on bicycles, those same cheap Jap bicycles which Blackett and Webb had not, until too late, thought of importing instead of the more costly products of Birmingham and Coventry, spreading the news far and wide. Presently twenty thousand or more Chinese had stopped work.

And it had all been perfectly unnecessary. The peaceful atmosphere of Malaya had been riven for no purpose. Ugly scenes had developed. Chinese detectives sent to look for Communists among the strikers, that *idée fixe* of the Chinese Protectorate, had been roughed up. Heads had been broken. In due course over a hundred workers had found themselves behind bars and, to their original demand for a ten cents a day increase in wages, the strikers were now adding two more: the release of the arrested men and compensation for injuries, bound in the end to involve a loss of face for the Government.

And why had it been unneccessary? Beceause that 'almost permanent' rubber boom which Monty and the market analysts had seen trembling in their telescopes at the end of 1936 had proved to be a mirage, as anyone in Malaya or the Netherlands East Indies could have told you it would. The price of rubber, ridiculously inflated by brokers' claims, had collapsed, aided by a recession in America. Sales of cars had declined and by the spring of 1938 the price of rubber had plummeted to about five pence a pound. Hardly had the strikers had their pay increased from sixty to seventy-five cents a day as a result of bitter struggles up and down the country, when workers were being laid off and wages reduced once more. But Monty, the young fool, impervious to the effects on Malaya's estate workers (on Malaya's social fabric even, for once this sort of thing started …!) of these wild fluctuations in price generated by the London market, had been unable to see further than the chance of a quick profit. Instead of squashing the brokers' claims he had egged them on. And that, thought Walter more grimly than ever, was another example of the changing times. 'Young men these days have no sense of responsibility to the country!'

The yogi, Walter discovered, gazing down at him with distaste, was a tall, cadaverous individual, evidently a Punjabi. He was clad only in a white *dhoti* and gold turban. In the middle of the turban a large white gem, perhaps a diamond but more likely a piece of cut glass, flared in the floodlights. Thin as he was his naked chest was nevertheless disturbingly equipped with a pair of well-formed female breasts. Some distance to the

right of the improvised stage the Blacketts' *kebun* could be seen tending a blazing bonfire.

Meanwhile, the yogi's assistant, a sallow, gold-toothed Eurasian in tattered black evening dress was following in Walter's wake among the guests, proffering for their inspection a box of tin-tacks and a cheap china tea-cup. The guests fingered them uncertainly. When they had satisfied themselves that no deception was being practised on them the Eurasian threw the box of tacks down to the yogi who caught it, opened it and began, rather gloomily, popping them into his mouth one by one and swallowing them. The guests continued to watch him uneasily. The only sound was the impatient cracking of Walter's knuckles.

The box of tacks was a large one and the yogi seemed to be in no hurry, as if anxious to savour each one. Presently the guests began to exchange glances, as if to say that it was dreadfully hot out here and would this go on much longer? Certain of the men, particularly those who considered their time valuable, glanced at their watches with a preoccupied air; one of them, whom Walter recognized as an influential executive of one of the big tyre companies in Singapore, even turned away from the balustrade altogether.

'Yes,' agreed Walter, swiftly taking him by the arm and compelling him to saunter up and down along the same path which he himself had been pacing earlier in the day, 'it's bound to come as a shock to those who, like you and I, knew him as a younger man. But then, at his time of life …' Walter shrugged sadly.

'Some time may elapse, I'm afraid, before we see his like again,' declared the man from the tyre company with an air of rather sepulchral piety, but again sneaking a look at his watch.

They began to discuss, in a desultory fashion while the yogi went on stolidly swallowing tacks, the mysterious latex-drinking snails which were said to have appeared on certain isolated estates. Neither of them was inclined to take these snails very seriously. 'Still,' said Walter, 'we'd better not let Mincing Lane get to hear of them or they'll be using the wretched creatures to fuel another round of speculation.' He paused sombrely, having reminded himself of the results of the last speculative boom. These speculators were playing the game of those who, like the Communists, wanted to foment trouble in the Colony. What a lot of strikes Singapore had seen this year already! The Harbour Board dockers had been on strike for three months … at a time when shipment of rubber and tin was vital, not only for profits but for the War Effort as well. Hardly had that collapsed when, amid violent riots, another one had started at the Firestone factory and then trouble had spread all over the place with rubber immobilized everywhere, a disastrous pile-up of fruit at the height of the season caused by a go-slow of pineapple cutters at the canning factories, and to cap it all, pitched battles between police trying to arrest trouble-makers at the Tai Thong factory and the labour force armed with staves, stones and soda-water bottles.

Walter, despite those heads of cake, began to suffer misgivings about the loyalty of his workers. What if the Blackett and Webb jubilee should be chosen for propaganda purposes not only by the Government to demonstrate 'Continuity in Prosperity' under British rule, but also *by the Communists* to demonstrate the exploitation and disaffection of the workers! The thought of a jubilee procession up the hill to Government House in the teeth of a howling mob was alarming. How the Langfields would laugh!

'Where are they taking Margaret?' demanded Walter's companion suddenly, for the yogi's Eurasian assistant, gold teeth gleaming, had selected his wife from the little herd of guests and with much polishing of hands was leading her down the steps to where the yogi, his meal of tin-tacks finished, was waiting glumly on the platform. Half-way down the steps she baulked and would have returned had not Monty come hurrying down to reassure her. The bristles on Walter's spine began to stir beneath his dress shirt.

All the lady was required for, explained the Eurasian in an ingratiating tone, was to inspect the mouth of the yogi. The yogi, recognizing the signal, opened his mouth wide. The Eurasian promptly grasped the lady's shrinking fingers and stuffed them into the yogi's open mouth. She snatched them out again quickly. No tin-tacks had been discovered. Monty, beside himself with delight, beamed up at the balustrade. In the strong lights he looked wilder than ever.

Meanwhile, the yogi, his appetite returning, had bitten the handle off the tea-cup which had been passed round for inspection earlier and was crunching it noisily between his teeth. When he had devoured the handle he smashed the rest of the cup by rapping it sharply against his own skull, then popped the broken pieces of china into his mouth, crunching them up too. Monty was invited this time to inspect his mouth and was soon able to confirm that the cup had been eaten up entirely. A slight delay followed while the yogi and his assistant peered at something in a cardboard box full of straw, evidently trying to decide how best to deal with it. Walter leaned over the balustrade and beckoned to Monty impatiently.

'Just a moment, Father.'

The yogi dipped his hand quickly into the box and withdrew a thrashing, apple-green snake, holding it up by the tail as it twisted this way and that trying to bite him. He quickly slid his other hand down the body and gripped the reptile firmly behind its head. The assistant began to hammer with his palms on a grimy drum. The guests gazed down at him apprehensively from the balustrade, afraid that something disagreeable might be about to happen. The yogi had opened his mouth and was slowly bringing the snake's head towards it while the rest of its body continued to thrash and flail against his wrists and forearms. 'Oh no!' cried one of the ladies in dismay. Hissing, the snake's head came nearer and nearer the yogi's mouth, its tongue flickering. Abruptly the yogi took the snake into his mouth and bit off its head. There was an audible cracking of bone, a working of the yogi's jaws as he masticated and swallowed it. Then the tip of a pink tongue appeared and licked a few scarlet drops from his lips. Walter stared down at the headless body of the snake which continued

to thrash by itself on the platform, smearing glistening red marks on the pale wood which, just for a moment, seemed to resemble Chinese ideographs, as if the snake were trying to make some last furious communication. One or two of the ladies had turned pale and even Walter himself was shaken. He announced loudly: 'If you would like to move inside, coffee and brandy will be served in the drawing-room where it's cooler.'

'But Father, he hasn't finished yet!' exclaimed Monty, dashing up the steps again as Walter began shepherding the guests back into the house. 'He drinks nitric acid. It's amazing. I've seen him do it. He dissolves a copper penny in it first and then he just swigs it! And he's going to walk barefoot through that bonfire before he drinks the acid … Look, I mean … since we've got the blighter here!'

Walter stared at his son for a moment, tight-lipped. Then he turned and strode back into the house. Presently, the yogi, left to his own devices, took off his sandals and began to trudge barefoot back and forth through the glowing embers of the bonfire while, at a little distance, his assistant discussed money matters with Monty in a high-pitched voice.

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Another hour elapsed before Walter had said goodbye to the last of the guests, some of whom had a stricken look. One of the ladies, so Abdul informed him, had been overcome by nausea and had been obliged to lie down: it was that ghastly business with the snake that had done it. He must remember to write a note of apology in the morning. He must also give Monty a dressing-down but that too would have to wait until morning for Monty had prudently disappeared.

Walter climbed the stairs wearily. It was some time since he had given his wife a thought and now he remembered that she had retired with a headache and was doubtless upset by the outcome of the garden-party. Could it still be the same day? That garden-party now seemed to have taken place weeks ago. He found her awake, lying as if stunned against a mound of pillows. She said she was feeling a little better and asked him where everyone was, it seemed very quiet.

'Search me. The only person who seems to be still here is young Ehrendorf. He's in the sitting-room smoking cigarettes. As for the others …' Walter shrugged. All the guests had gone. Monty had gone. Joan had gone. The yogi had gone, full of china.

'You mean, full of china tea?'

'No, not really, no, I don't,' replied Walter in an edgy sort of tone.

Mrs Blackett sighed but felt too weak to pursue the matter.

'Well, I suppose I should go to the hospital to see how old Webb is getting on.'

Downstairs, Walter found that there was another guest who had not yet departed though now, daunted by the empty echoing rooms, he seemed to be in the process of doing so: this was Dr Brownley, their family doctor. Dr Brownley frequently visited the Blacketts, but more often for social than for professional reasons. Indeed, he was always invited to the Blacketts' parties, always came, was always the first to arrive and usually the last to leave. The Doctor, however, was troubled by the knowledge that he was always going to the Blacketts' but *never invited them back*! Someone less addicted than the Doctor to the grand social occasions in which the Blacketts specialized, where inevitably one found oneself cheek by jowl with the people who mattered in the Straits, might have preferred to soothe his inflamed conscience, or at least to limit the spread of further inflammation, by not accepting any more invitations. Such a remedy, alas, was out of reach of the good Doctor. Though his inflammation throbbed more painfully on each new occasion he simply could not but accept. Now, at the sight of Walter on the stairs he winced visibly, thinking: 'This makes it twelve times in a row and they haven't once been invited to my house!' He had been hoping to slip out of the house while no one was about, thus avoiding the awkwardness of a leave-taking. Indeed, the reason Walter had not seen him earlier was that the Doctor had dodged behind a bookcase to avoid detection. But this time there was no escape and he called out heartily: 'Ah, there you are, Walter. I was looking for you to thank you and, of course, Mrs Blackett for a delightful … mind you, one of many such … I'm just off now. Must be going. Look here, you must come to my place one of these days…Can I give you a lift? No, of course, this is where you live, isn't it? Ha, ha, well, hm … You must come to …' His voice trailed off into a mutter as he prepared to plunge into the friendly darkness outside. Issuing invitations, the Doctor had found, provided a little welcome relief in awkward situations like this … but you felt correspondingly worse later when faced with the prospect of redeeming them!

'What's that?' demanded Walter, puzzled by the Doctor's habit of muttering to himself before departure. The Doctor flinched. 'I was just saying that you must come to my place one of these days,' he was obliged to state in a clear and unequivocal tone.

'Oh, all right. Why not?' said Walter. 'Good night, Doctor.' And with that he returned to the drawing-room.

Walter, who had a horror of hospitals, had been contemplating a quiet *stengah* before paying a visit to old Mr Webb. He had forgotten that young Ehrendorf was still there and was not altogether pleased to find the room full of cigarette smoke. 'These days you really have to winkle out your guests one by one,' he thought as Ehrendorf stood up politely, trailing a newspaper from his fingers. However, on the whole he had a good opinion of Ehrendorf and even felt, as one male to another, some sympathy for him in his predicament with

Joan. But there it was, women were peculiar and there was not very much one could do about it. If some woman had thrown wine in Walter's face as a young man he would have fetched her a clout. Ah, but then he had never pretended to have the exquisite manners of an Ehrendorf and could very well see that, equipped with polished manners, one could not go about clouting women at garden-parties.

'You haven't seen Joan, have you?' Ehrendorf enquired, resuming his seat but sitting, Walter was glad to perceive, on the edge of his chair as if ready to stand again.

'Not for some time. I have an idea that she may have gone out for the evening.'

'Well, in that case it seems,' said Ehrendorf with a rather strained smile, 'that I've been stood up. Well, never mind, it's not for the first time. I'll just finish my drink if you don't mind and then I'll be on my way.'

'No hurry.'

Walter called for his *stengah* and sank back in his chair, glad enough after all to have Ehrendorf's company and to delay his visit to the hospital for a little while. Walter did not greatly care for Americans these days: the acrimony aroused over the Rubber Restriction scheme and the subsequent counter-attack by the American consumers had left its mark. But when one day Captain Ehrendorf, posted to the US military attache's office in Singapore and armed with an introduction to the Blacketts, had presented himself at their house, neither Walter nor the rest of his family had been able to find fault with him. This had been partly because his introduction had come from none other than Matthew Webb and the Blacketts were curious to learn more about Matthew and the way he lived (incidentally, he must soon do something about sending the poor boy a telegram about his father's illness), but most of all because Ehrendorf himself was unusually charming and good-looking. He might, indeed, have been specially constructed to topple all Walter's prejudices about Americans.

Americans, thought Walter, are vulgar: but no one had better taste than Ehrendorf. They are loud: no one more soft-spoken. They have no culture: Walter had yet to meet anyone more cultured, better educated, better mannered, more tactful and well-informed. The fellow, amazing though it might seem to Walter's jaundiced eye, was quite simply a gentleman. Walter had found it hard to think of him as an American at all. Why, he even spoke English like a civilized person.

Ehrendorf had wasted no time in telling the Blacketts what he knew of Matthew, whom he had first met at Oxford. He himself had been a Rhodes scholar at the university (here he paused for a moment but the Blacketts had stared at him blankly) for a couple of years. Then, five or six years later, they had bumped into each other again, this time in Geneva in 1932 where he himself had been posted as a very junior military assistant to Mr Norman Davis in the long, tortuous and exhausting discussions on the Disarmament Conference. Matthew had not been working for the League Secretariat itself but for some other organization whose name escaped him, connected with it in some way. There were so many! Was it the International Peace Bureau, or the Red Cross Committee? Was it the Permanent Secretariat for War Veterans and War Victims? Or the Union for the Assistance of Calamity-Stricken Populations? Of one thing he was pretty sure, he laughed: it was not the International Humanitarian Bureau for Lovers of Animals, whose rather odd programme was 'to extend to the animal kingdom the sentiments and duties of humane justice'. He had a suspicion that it might well have been the International League for the Protection of Native Peoples; that was certainly the field he was interested in, anyway. But no matter! How glad they had been to meet each other again!

Geneva in winter was the most depressing town on earth, the international community was cliquish and segregated grimly by nationalities, the Genevese burgher himself was the most narrow and xenophobic animal on two legs. He and Matthew, whom he considered 'the most wonderful person in the world' and 'a wonderful human being' (young Kate tittered when he said this and clasped a hand over her mouth), casting aside the depressing and Jesuitical, even Jansenist, shackles of Disarmament had resumed their own much more interesting discussions on art, sex, Freud, the existence or otherwise of God, chattering away, as young men will, he added with a smile, about the causes of the Thirty Years War and whether the Defenestration of Prague was instrumental in the downfall of the Palatinate and of the Bohemian church, and countless other matters of this kind which they had been unable to settle to their own satisfaction during the time they had spent together at Oxford. Matthew, 'a very delightful person', had been the ideal companion in this dull and provincial Swiss town. They had even managed to make a quick trip to London that winter to see Gielgud's production of Rodney Ackland's magnificent play, *Strange Orchestra* at the St Martin's Theatre. Then, alas, all too soon, the call of their respective duties had caused their paths to diverge once more. In the years that followed they had only managed to meet again once or twice, for a hurried meal in the nearest restaurant to this or that railway station in some European city where the threads which each was unreeling behind him on his way through Life's maze had happened briefly to intersect. But they had at least kept in touch by letter, just about.

Walter was sufficiently accustomed to American hyperbole to realize that Ehrendorf might not literally consider Matthew to be 'the most wonderful person in the world'. Americans, he knew, were inclined to use such expressions about any acquaintance they found moderately inoffensive. Still, it was encouraging. The poor boy's bizarre education might not have completely ruined him, after all. Mrs Blackett had reacted more cautiously: gossiping about the Defenestration of Prague, whatever that was, did not seem to her such a good sign. As for Ehrendorf, he really was delightful. The Blacketts were charmed by him. Not even young Kate, who was passing then through a stage when she detested all men, could quite resist him.

Ehrendorf had become a frequent visitor at the Blacketts' house and he would call without performing any of the preliminary social manoeuvres which were still customary among the older Singapore families. Instead of making use of the box fitted to the gate with a tiny slit for visiting cards, and then retiring, as the ritual required, to wait for an invitation, he would have his staff car drive him boldly up to the front door and wander in unannounced. He never stayed for long, though. He was always on his way somewhere…to Government House, perhaps; the Blacketts would not have been surprised to learn, such was Ehrendorf's disarming ease of manner, that he wandered in on the Governor and Lady Thomas as casually as he did on them, and he was certainly on friendly terms with the Governor's ADC and staff ('the servants' hall' as it was known at Government House) … or to a reception at some legation, or further afield, to a conference in Manila, or Saigon, or Batavia. Sometimes, if he were going to a party nearby and Joan was at a loose end, he would courteously invite her to join him and together they would be whisked away in the staff car to some elaborate reception or beach party. It was clear, of course, that Ehrendorf, despite his accomplishment, was a long way from being an ideal, or even a possible, suitor for Joan. But his manifest good-nature inhibited the elder Blacketts from objecting for a time to the attentions that he was paying to their daughter and, in any case, it very soon became clear to Walter that no objections were likely to be needed. Her delicate appearance notwithstanding, Joan's tender womanhood was clad in a tough hide. The distressing day which this young man seated opposite him had evidently just experienced would have been further proof of it, if he had needed proof.

'Perhaps you would tell Joan that I waited for her,' Ehrendorf said calmly and without resentment as both men got to their feet. 'I guess it slipped her mind that she had a date with me.'

'I expect so,' agreed Walter blandly. 'Well, I must be on my way over to Outram Road. I could drop you off in Market Street if you like?' But Ehrendorf had a car waiting and each went his separate way.

The night was very hot and still, but clear. Walter found it refreshing to sit there in the back of the open car beneath the stars, surging through the empty streets. And how peaceful the low, tiled roofs of the shophouses along Orchard Road looked in the starlight! Noticing that the California Sandwich Shoppe on the right-hand side was still open he remembered that he had eaten nothing, apart from Mr Webb's ears, for some hours. For a moment he considered telling the *syce* to stop, but no … he no longer felt hungry. The heat and weariness had robbed him of his appetite. At the bottom of Orchard Road the Bentley turned to the right into Hill Street, past the white Moorish façade of the Oriental Telephone and Telegraph Company trembling in the starlight like a vision from the Arabian Nights, and then glided on its way south-west under the looming blue-black shadow of the police barracks, over the river (Walter, holding his breath against the stench, briefly glimpsed the silhouette of Blackett and Webb's godown at the bend of the river and closer at hand on the water itself the huddled lighters and *sampans* where prodigious numbers of Chinese were fated to live out their lives), and then on along New Bridge Road towards the General Hospital, Walter brooding now about the Chinese once more.

'We in Singapore may have our share of overcrowding and child-labour and slums, but at least it's not like Shanghai!'

For Walter, Shanghai was a constant reminder, a sort of *memento mori*, of the harsh world which lay outside the limits of British rule. The population of Shanghai's foreign areas had already been excessive before the war had broken over the city in August 1937. But within a few weeks the influx of refugees to this sanctuary had brought it to more than five million. Moreover, these were people who, even in peacetime, had been living on a level of bare subsistence that all too often dipped into total destitution: then a man's only means of supporting his family was to sift through rubbish bins or dredge the flotsam from the ships along the wharves. 'You would think the Chinese here would be more grateful considering what their relatives in Shanghai have to put up with!' There existed, Walter was aware, a macabre thermometer to the state of health and well-being of the Shanghai population (of other cities in China, too): namely, the 'exposed corpse'. Even in relatively good times, such was the precarious level of life in China, vast numbers of 'exposed corpses' would be collected on the streets … six-thousand-odd in the streets of Shanghai in 1935. In 1937 more than twenty thousand bodies had been found on the streets or on waste ground in the city. By 1938 with the help of the war the number of corpses collected had risen to more than a hundred thousand *in the International Settlement alone*! 'The cremation of six hundred corpses,' the Health Department report for that year declared encouragingly, 'takes only four hours, though a greater number must have from six to eight hours for complete combustion.'

Well, no wonder that labour in Shanghai was so cheap and productive when the worker was accompanied everywhere by his grim *doppelgänger* the 'exposed corpse'! 'Our workers in Singapore may sometimes find it hard to make ends meet but at least they don't have that sort of thing to cope with. And why not? Because men like old Webb saw fit to devote their lives, not to a lot of political bilge about nationalism, welfare and equality, but to the building up of businesses which would actually produce some wealth! Perhaps one day we shall see what sort of fist our rabble-rousing friends the Communists make of feeding people but I only hope I don't have to depend on them for my next meal!'

Righteous indignation welled up inside him at the prospect until he remembered that, for the moment at

least, the Communists were dropping their anti-British campaign, so people said, in order to concentrate all their efforts against the Japanese.

'Well, Mohammed,' asked Walter leaning forward in the rush of air to speak into the *syce*'s ear, 'are you happy living in Singapore?'

'Very happy, *Tuan*.' Walter could not see the man's features in the darkness beneath the black outline of the cap he wore, but he glimpsed the flash of white teeth as he smiled.

Presently, soothed by the vastness of the night sky, his thoughts turned to Mr Webb again and not, this time, with the lingering resentment of the old man's rigid ideas which he had felt earlier in the evening (those contemptuous marzipan smiles) but with sympathy and gratitude. And for the first time he began to feel a real pang of sorrow, that painful sense of absence, of being deserted almost, when someone whose life has been closely intertwined with your own suddenly disappears. For in spite of his age, Mr Webb's collapse had come as a surprise: it was only when you had a hand in picking him up that you realized that there was nothing much to him any more but skin and bone and the undimmed presence of a powerful personality, what weight there *was* consisted largely of his heavy English shoes. He had, after all, continued hale and hearty throughout the decade that followed his retirement. Only in the past year or two had he shown some signs of failing: at one time he had come to believe that his fellow directors of Blackett and Webb were trying to poison him, in the gruesome Malay fashion, with needle-like bamboo hairs coiled like watch-springs which then unwind to puncture the intestines or lodge undetected in the mucous membrane of the bladder. Fortunately, he had forgotten about it after a while.

Next, there had come a final flaring-up of the entrepreneurial fires which had been banked up peacefully since his retirement. He had demanded that Walter should expand Blackett and Webb into a great vertical combine like Lever Brothers or Dunlop. A vast amount of rubber was already under their control and there was still time to get a foothold in the palm-oil business. Why should they not go into the production and marketing of motor-tyres and margarine in Europe and America? Walter, though he considered the idea ridiculous, had murmured soothingly that it was worth thinking about. But old Mr Webb had become querulous, demanding a proper response to his plan. Gently Walter had explained that the opportunity for such an expansion was long since past: the competition was too powerful, capital and European executives too hard to come by, even if business had not been so sternly regulated by Britain's war economy. Mr Webb had been bitter and disbelieving, had denounced Walter as 'a mere tradesman' … but presently the fires had died down again; in the last few months before today's fateful garden-party at which he had tumbled out of his chair and into the strange twilit ante-room to death, neither his dreams of a huge combine nor his fears of bamboo poisoning had caused him any distress. The question of palm-oil, though, had lodged in Walter's mind like a coiled bamboo hair: insignificant at first, it was coming imperceptibly to irritate him. Blackett and Webb should have become involved in palm-oil ten years ago. A businessman must move with the times. How often, recalling the fate of the fine-millers of rice in London ruined by the opening of the Suez Canal, had he not warned young men against thinking that a business could be maintained in a changing world without constant change!

The Bentley, having skirted the teeming, narrow streets of Chinatown, ill-lit and even at this hour apparently bubbling with sinister activity and subversion, had now almost reached Outram Road. The several buildings of the hospital were scattered on a small hill among trees; first-class, second-class and third-class buildings respectively housed patients occupying corresponding positions on the social ladder. Mr Webb, naturally, had been taken to a building from which he would be able to leave the world in a suitable manner. The Bentley, therefore, drew up beside the half-dozen cream pillars which formed the entrance to the main building: Walter remained in the motorcar while the *syce* went to make enquiries about Mr Webb. The man was gone some time and, presently, Walter got out to take a stroll beneath half a dozen tall palms on the lawn opposite the building. Above, on the roof, he could see the silhouette of a clock tower but it was too dark to make out the time. He supposed it must be well after midnight by now. Through the open windows on the ground floor he could see into what was evidently a general ward, dimly lit. He stared into it for a moment, half fascinated, half repelled : he was just able to make out shadowy figures stretched motionless beneath the silently whirring fans. So, this was how it ended for a man who had once had the Rangoon rice trade by the throat: in essentials not very different, he thought sombrely, from the way it ended for one of Shanghai's 'exposed corpses'.

A crunch of gravel. Walter turned away. The *syce* was approaching accompanied by Major Archer. The Major had come earlier on a similar mission to Walter's. Old Mr Webb was still in the same condition, unconscious and paralysed. Walter could no doubt look in on him for a moment if he wanted.

'Perhaps tomorrow,' said Walter, moving back towards the Bentley, reprieved. 'I really just came to find out how he was getting on.' He lingered, however, for a moment with the Major, explaining that Mr Webb's collapse meant that a number of difficult decisions would have to be taken. What were they going to do now about the theme of 'Continuity' in the jubilee procession? That was just one of many new problems that were zigzagging their way to the surface like bubbles as Mr Webb drew nearer to death. And should he make arrangements for young Matthew Webb to come out to Singapore? 'After all, it seems a long way for him to come if he's not going to inherit.'

The Major showed surprise. But surely. Why, Mr Webb had happened to mention only the other day that

Matthew would be his heir! He had even asked the Major some months earlier to witness his signature on the appropriate document and at the same time had spoken warmly of those who devoted themselves to the rehabilitation of native peoples.

'He said nothing to me about it,' muttered Walter, thankful for the darkness which helped to mask the shock which this news had caused him. Until this moment he had allowed himself to entertain some hopes that, in default of an heir, he himself might be left at least a substantial part of Mr Webb's holdings in the business.

'Surely he would have told me if he had changed his mind?' He stood for a moment with his hand on the door of the car looking up at the stars.

'Well, perhaps I will go and look in on him after all,' he said finally and with a nod to the Major made his way heavily towards where his former partner lay on his death-bed.

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The medical opinion had been that Mr Webb would not survive more than a few hours. But the hours and the days and presently the weeks went by and still the old fellow lingered on. An era had ended, Walter was right about that, and no doubt a new era had begun. But Mr Webb somehow managed to survive this jolting passage over the switched points of history and live on into the spring of 1941. Most likely, if his feeble hold on life had been shaken loose and he had died then and there, which probably would have been best for everybody, Walter would not have thought it worth while to summon Matthew merely to attend a funeral. But Mr Webb continued to cling on stubbornly and, besides, if Matthew was to inherit his father's share of the business Walter preferred to have him in Singapore where a clear idea of the serious responsibilities attached to his inheritance could be the more easily printed on his mind. After all, they knew so little of Matthew. He would have to make up his own mind, of course, whether or not to come out. Was he even in Europe still? A number of the more affluent people in Britain, according to J. B. Priestley's wireless broadcasts, were prudently moving to Canada and the United States, leaving the lower classes to defend their estates against the Germans. Walter knew nothing of Matthew's financial situation but assumed that he must be, at least, comfortably off.

As a child Matthew had once or twice written dutiful letters to 'Dear Uncle Walter', thanking him (his little fingers guided by his mother's hand) for some Christmas present or other. In the years that followed the General Strike one or two more letters had arrived. Their purpose was not stated but Walter had not found it hard to guess. The young man, filled with remorse by the estrangement from his father, was seeking some word of him. Naturally, Walter had replied with reassuring descriptions of the old man's comfortable days at the Mayfair Rubber Company. Matthew had continued to write an occasional letter to the Blacketts throughout the thirties, though his letters had grown shorter and the information they contained somewhat random, as if he merely wrote down whatever caught his eye as he looked around his hotel room or out of the window (he never seemed to have a home of his own). These letters had come not only from Geneva but occasionally from other cities, too. There had once even been a picture postcard from Tokyo, showing what appeared to be a sheep standing up to its knees in a lake. 'What is supposed to be the purpose of this?' Walter had wondered, amazed, staring at the sheep and trying to penetrate its significance. It seemed that the boy had paid a visit to the Far East, after all.

One of Matthew's letters in 1939 had mentioned that he would soon be in London on some unspecified business. As it happened, Kate, then aged almost twelve, had been there at the time, staying with an aunt for a few days before returning from school to Singapore for the summer holidays, holidays destined to be prolonged by the outbreak of war. The Blacketts' curiosity about Matthew was considerable. Why should Kate not go and have a chat with him?

Walter had wasted no time in cabling his London office, instructing them to telephone every hotel in London until they found a Matthew Webb. In the meantime poor Kate, who had not been consulted and who naturally dreaded the meeting in prospect, had waited praying that he would not be found. The principal cause of her despair was the thought of being seen 'by a man' in her school uniform, a fate which she and her school-friends agreed was the ultimate humiliation. But in due course, after on or two false alarms, Matthew had been unearthed in a shabby boarding-house in Bloomsbury. The London manager of Blackett and Webb had packed Kate into a taxi and rushed her across London.

The meeting had not been a great success at first. Matthew had been lying on his bed in his underwear reading a book while his trousers, which had just been soaked in a cloudburst, were drying over a chair in the window. Without his trousers he was reluctant to let a young girl into his room although, as Walter later observed, one might have thought that this was one of the few contingencies in life that his progressive education had prepared him for. Moreover, at first he appeared never to have heard of any Kate Blackett and could not think what she wanted of him. Kate had had to shout explanations through the door, arousing the interest of the other lodgers. Meanwhile, the landlady's suspicions had been awakened by the telephone drag-net which had caught Matthew in her establishment and she had become convinced that he was a malefactor or prevert of some kind. So Kate's mortified explanations through the door had been punctuated by

instructions from the landlady for him to leave her premises immediately. Finally, however, Matthew had dragged on his sodden trousers and opened the door.

Kate was later asked to describe the person who had confronted her as the door opened. Well, he was quite nice, she thought. She could not think of anything else to say. Oh yes she could, he wore spectacles. Chiefly what she remembered was that his shoes squelched when he walked: they had evidently been soaked, too. He had walked straight out of the boarding-house, ignoring the landlady and the London manager, who was rubbing his hands in consternation at the way things had turned out. Kate, dreadfully embarrassed by the furore she had caused, had followed Matthew to a tea-shop round the corner. She had felt so self-conscious that almost the only thing she remembered about their conversation was that when, at the end of it, Matthew had risen from his seat there had been a wet patch where he had been sitting. And yet they had got on very well really, she assured her father. He was quite nice, she thought.

Why stay at such a wretched place? Why travel with only one pair of trousers and shoes? It could hardly be that he was short of money. He presumably had a salary of some kind and Walter was certain that despite their estrangement old Mr Webb had not ceased to provide a generous allowance for his son. 'I'm afraid,' Walter had said when discussing Kate's revelations with his wife, 'that all those half-baked schools have had their effect on the lad, whatever Jim Ehrendorf may say to the contrary.'

As it happened, the Blacketts had been unable to learn much more from Ehrendorf than they had from Kate. Ehrendorf was perfectly well able to tell them what Matthew *thought* about a number of matters, many of them abstract. He could tell them where Matthew stood on 'socialism in a single country', on J. W. Dunne's 'serial time' and suchlike. What he could not do was to give the Blacketts any real idea of what he was *like*. Was he married? How did he dress? Well, if he wasn't married where did he eat his meals? Smiling, Ehrendorf had to admit that they had been so busy talking that many of these questions had not crossed his mind. Now that he thought about it he had come across Matthew once or twice in restaurants in Geneva, eating by himself with a book propped against a jug of wine or beer. But there was not much else he could remember. He agreed with Kate that Matthew wore glasses, however. He was sure of this because once, while they were strolling under the plane trees on the Quai Wilson, he had broken them.

'How?'

'Sir?'

'How did he break them?'

But Ehrendorf could not remember. Perhaps he had dropped them. They had been discussing Locarno at the time. Matthew had strong feelings about such treaties and soon Ehrendorf was sharing them with the Blacketts: it seemed that as a good League man Matthew did not believe in the Big Powers settling things behind closed doors.

'And so,' smiled Walter, 'all you can tell us is that he wears glasses, which we knew already.'

'And that he's a wonderful human being,' added Ehrendorf with warmth.

Kate had taken to giggling whenever Ehrendorf spoke warmly of Matthew. This time, when she giggled, Ehrendorf suddenly sprang across the room and seized her before she could escape. He picked her up bodily, although she was getting to be quite a lump, and brought her back under one arm. This time he was going to find out why she was laughing. In the end Kate had to confess: it was because he was always calling Matthew a 'wonderful human being' and she kept thinking he was calling him a 'wonderful Human Bean'! Her parents exchanged exasperated glances at this: Kate had recently discovered that she had a sense of humour and they had suffered greatly in consequence. But Ehrendorf seemed to find it amusing. Thereafter Matthew became known to the younger Blacketts as 'the Human Bean'.

Well, since old Mr Webb continued to cling on stubbornly Matthew had to be sent for, whatever he was like, and influence used on his behalf to overcome the difficulties of war-time travel. Fortunately, rubber was a priority cargo these days and the Ministry of Supply listened sympathetically to Walter's request that Matthew should be sent out to take his father's place in the Mayfair Rubber Company. It took time before Matthew could be located through his solicitors (it turned out that he had not made a prudent bolt for it with the stampeding herd of well-to-do), and more time before the details could be arranged. The result was that not just weeks but months had passed since the unlucky day the old gentleman had fallen out of his chair at the garden-party before word eventually reached Walter that Matthew had started out on his journey. But these days unless you were a brass hat or a Minister nobody knew when you would arrive, or even if you would arrive at all.

Mr Webb, though severely paralysed and still unable to communicate, had in due course been moved back to the Mayfair with a nurse in constant attendance. Walter, who himself had a secret dread of dying in hospital, had overborne medical advice to the contrary and had the old gentleman returned to his home. There he could more easily take a few minutes away from his business affairs to lift a corner of the mosquito net and give a comforting squeeze to the cold knuckles which lay on the sheet.

Once or twice Mr Webb had tried to say something. Something to do with the sun, apparently. It could hardly be that the light was bothering him because the blinds of split bamboo chicks had been unrolled and allowed only a muted glow to enter the room. Perhaps the old man had been thinking of agreeable evenings spent prowling with his secateurs and watching the sunlight gleam on the skins of his naked gymnasts as they swooped and swung and balanced, growing stronger every day. Walter found it disturbing, nevertheless, to

see his friend lying there, breathing noisily in his tent of white muslin. Mr Webb's eyelids were half open but his expression was vacant for the most part and he showed little sign of being aware of his surroundings. 'This is how we all finish,' mused Walter grimly.

'It's the end of an era,' he said aloud to Major Archer who stood beside him in a respectful pose at his dying chairman's bedside.

Because presently Mr Webb again tried to say something about the sun Walter decided that Miss Chiang should be recalled.

Perhaps he would find her presence soothing. After Mr Webb's collapse the gymnasts and body-builders had been dispersed with a bonus added to their emoluments. Miss Chiang had declined indignantly when offered an additional reward for staying away from her former employer while he was in hospital. Now the Major was given the delicate task of running her to earth in some tenement in Chinatown and persuading her to return to visit the patient. She agreed without fuss and her presence did indeed seem to exert a soothing influence on the old man. She was still wearing one of Joan's cast-off dresses and Walter, glimpsing her one day as she was leaving the Mayfair was taken aback, as much by her good looks as by the thought of her dubious relationship with old Mr Webb. 'Who would have thought that Webb would end up like this with a half-caste holding his hand!'

Walter, these days, had little time to spare for visiting the sick. Business had never been more hectic and besides he was becoming increasingly preoccupied with the problem of finding a husband for Joan. Now that it had become clear that he was unlikely to inherit Mr Webb's share of the business it had become more important than ever that she should make a sensible match.

'What are your feelings for Jim Ehrendorf, if you don't mind me asking?' he enquired mildly one day, finding her alone.

'Oh, he'd put his hand in the fire for me,' she replied with a laugh.

Walter was silent for a moment, contemplating this reply which, though interesting, did not answer his question.

'Don't you believe me?'

'Of course I believe you,' said Walter, laughing in turn. 'What I wanted to know was what you feel for *him*?'

Joan shrugged, gazing out of the window, her eyes like green pebbles. 'He's all right. He gets on my nerves though, I'm thinking of chucking him one of these days … in fact, the sooner the better.' Walter was satisfied with this reply.

Some days later, however, he thought of it again in a rather different light. For it happened that one day, in the course of a casual conversation while waiting for Joan to come downstairs, Ehrendorf said something which Walter, as a rubber producer, found unusually interesting, and which placed him in something of a predicament if he were to pursue his policy of replacing Ehrendorf in Joan's affections with someone who would make a more suitable husband.

Walter's predicament stemmed indirectly from the successful operation of the Restriction scheme's tap for controlling the flow of rubber on to the market, of which he had originally been one of the chief plumbers. As a result of the recession of 1938 and the fall in price to five pence a pound the Committee had given the tap a savage twist, shutting down the flow to forty-five per cent of capacity. Thereafter in the reservoir of rubber stocks the level began to sink and the price to creep up again. By the beginning of 1939 the level had fallen once more below the danger mark which had released the previous boom, but the Committee still showed no sign of opening the tap.

As it had turned out, it was neither the idleness of the native smallholders nor the lack of capacity of the producing countries which had now set the price of rubber on its long, steady climb, but the declaration of war in Europe. At the end of 1939 with the level in the reservoir very low (a mere two months' absorption) the price had been standing at a gratifying shilling a pound. This, patriotism apart, had been a tense period for Walter and his colleagues. What effect would war have on the use of rubber? Their experience during the Great War had been of little help: in those days the industry had hardly got under way. But they had not had long to wait. Despite a grudging increase in the amount released to the market the level continued to sink. Rubber was being used more than ever.

At this point the Committee began to come under heavy pressure, not just from the manufacturers but from the United States Government and the British Ministry of Supply. More rubber must be released! And it was, but still not enough. The German attack on France and the Low Countries the preceding spring (May 1940) had alarmed the Americans about their future supplies: they wanted to build up a reserve in case it should be needed for their defence programme. And so they had established the Rubber Reserve Company to buy the 150,000 tons they thought they would need at a decent price of up to twenty US cents a pound; the Committee had agreed to increase the flow so that there would be enough rubber on the market for them to buy. Presently the Americans had decided to make it 330,000 tons.

Alas, against all expectations the amount of rubber used by private manufacturers continued to rise and, despite the increased rate of release, there was still not enough to go round. The United States Government's twenty cents, which at one time would have been considered bountiful, was being resolutely outbid by private manufacturers who, often as not (Walter had to smile at the thought of it) were themselves the chaps who had been appointed as buying agents for the Government and who were now in the satisfactory position of bidding

against (and naturally outbidding) their official selves! How poignant it was when the Reserve Company found that after six months of effort its cupboard was still almost as bare as it had been at the beginning! Even when the Committee had at last reluctantly agreed to raise the rate of release to one hundred per cent for the first quarter of 1941 there was still no sign of the market reaching saturation point. The spreading Japanese influence, moreover, was diverting rubber from Indo-China and Siam away from Britain and the United States. There could no longer be any serious doubt about it, in Walter's view: the producers' wildest dreams were being realized. This time they had a *genuine* shortage of rubber, not just the wishful thinking of a fast-talking London broker.

Now in February 1941 while he was chatting idly with Ehrendorf about Japan's need for raw materials and the powerful grip that this gave the Western nations on her wind-pipe (where on earth had Joan got to, by the way, she surely hadn't stood him up *again*!) the young man happened to remark that his countrymen were planning to acquire a further 100,000 tons of rubber for the Reserve Company.

'What did you say?' asked Walter casually, doing his best to conceal his surprise: this was the first he had heard of such a deal. He was certain that none of the other producers or dealers in Singapore was aware of it. Nor had he heard anything from his friends on the Committee. In fact, he could hardly believe that it was true; it seemed more likely that Ehrendorf had made a mistake. Ehrendorf repeated what he had said: he had heard it from someone at the consulate. 'By the way,' he added cheerfully, 'it's supposed to be a secret so please keep it to yourself. Careless talk can cost jobs as well as lives.'

'Of course,' agreed Walter blandly, and then to change the subject asked: 'What did you do to your hand?' Ehrendorf's left hand was bandaged.

'Oh, it's nothing. Just a burn.' Walter was on the point of asking him now he had done it but, on second thoughts, decided not to pursue the matter. An uncomfortable silence prevailed for a few moments until at last Joan's footstep was heard on the stairs.

In March Ehrendorf's prediction was proved correct when news came that the Committee had agreed to an offer for a further 100,000 tons. This gave Walter food for thought. A day or two earlier Joan had confided in him that she had now definitely decided to see no more of Ehrendorf. He was getting on her nerves! She was going to clear the decks! And yet, Walter realized, this might not be altogether convenient for himself because it so happened that there was something about the American attitude to the buying of rubber which he badly wanted to know. And it seemed possible that Ehrendorf might be able to tell him.

For some months Walter had been aware that sooner or later difficulties would arise over the fact that the Reserve Company, though given the job of piling up vast quantities of rubber, was being constantly outbid by the big American companies. Why, of 140,000 tons at present afloat for America, the Reserve Company's share was a paltry 5,000 tons! This situation, with the American Government increasingly biting its nails over its reserve stocks, could not be expected to last. Already the first hints were reaching Singapore that the American authorities were on the point of taking some remedial action. Walter was anxious to know what that action would be before it was actually taken.

There was only one thing to be done. Though he did not like to interfere in Joan's private affairs (except, of course, where a potential husband might be concerned) Walter decided to explain his predicament to his daughter. She listened carefully to what he had to say and once again he was pleased by her quick grasp of business matters. 'I can't promise, of course, but it might just happen that we learned something that would do the firm a power of good.'

'A reprieve has been granted!' declared Joan, smiling. 'What a lucky man he is to have you pleading his cause!'

12

Walter did not consider himself a person easily given to self-doubt and discouragement: vigorous initiative was more his cup of tea. But sometimes these days he could not avoid the feeling that his familiar world was crumbling away at an alarming rate. No doubt the Japanese were at the root of a great deal of the present trouble in the Far East: since 1937 a veritable blizzard of edicts designed to cripple European and American interests in China had come from their puppet Government in Peking. Foreign trade had been progressively frozen out and replaced by Japanese monopolies. Look at the huge cigarette factory currently being built in Peking by the Manchuria Tobacco Company, a sinister edifice indeed when you remembered that non-Japanese cigarettes were already subject to a special discriminatory tax throughout Inner Mongolia! Or consider the way the Japanese had taken over the Peking—Mukden and Peking—Suiyan Railways without paying a cent of the interest these railways owed to the foreign bondholders who had financed them, not to mention the havoc they were wreaking throughout China with their military currency. Nor had Blackett and Webb been spared: their import-export trade with Shantung, which had once gone through Tsingtao, had been driven from there by penal anti-Western restrictions to Weihaiwei, only to have the same restrictions follow hot on their heels. Walter did not particularly blame the Japanese for taking what they could get, but he did blame the British Government for allowing them to do so with impunity.

But even without the Japanese Walter believed that his familiar world would still have been crumbling. The

strikes of the past decade had changed the whole complexion of Malaya. Serious strikes had continued: Walter doubted now whether they would ever stop. The rise in the cost of living brought about by the outbreak of the war in Europe was the present cause: the workers were aware that profits had risen, too. Five months ago (December 1940) two and a half thousand tappers in the Bahau Rompin area had struck, claiming a daily rate of $1.10 for a task of 350 to 400 trees. The estate manager had promptly paid them off, which meant that they lost the barrack accommodation on the estate that went with the job. They had set up a makeshift camp in Bahau Town. When the police had come to arrest the ring-leaders a few days later crowds sympathetic to the workers had confronted them. Ugly scenes had developed in the course of which the police had opened fire, killing three workers.

Nor was that the end of it, nor likely to be for years to come, in Walter's view. At this very moment, while he sat eating lunch in the Cricket Club with a colleague, Indian workers in the Klang District were on strike. If you had tried to tell old Webb that one day Indian estate workers would take to this strike game he would not have believed you. Indian workers, though paid less than Chinese, were habitually docile and respectful of authority. And yet now they were having to quell them with police and troops! Many of Walter's friends at the Singapore Club were amazed at this change of spots by the Indian workers, but not Walter. He had been expecting it for some time. Because now, he knew, the changed atmosphere in the country would permit such things to happen. The old order of things was as dead as a doornail. Walter sighed and dipped a silver spoon into the pudding which crouched on his plate, a solid moulding of greyish tapioca with coconut milk and a thin, dark syrup. *Gula Malacca!* How that cool taste stirred memories of the old days in Singapore!

His thoughts were interrupted by the appearance of a 'boy' with a telephone message which had been relayed from his office: Mr Webb's condition had taken a turn for the worse. Would he come at once? Walter, perhaps in the grip of nostalgia, had drunk several beers and, unusually for him, did not feel altogether sober. He glanced around the room as he stood up: many of the other diners were in uniform and he thought : 'I'd better not fall over and make an ass of myself in front of this crowd!' But he managed without difficulty to negotiate the door and the hallway in a dignified manner. It was outside on the steps, beneath the red-brick Victorian portico, that he almost had a serious collision with a tall, thin and rather chinless Army officer who was entering the Club. The officer's disapproving expression intensified into a grimace of annoyance as Walter, to prevent himself plunging head first down the steps, grasped a thin arm in its rolled-up khaki sleeve. A glance at those blue eyes and tentative moustache was enough. Although Walter, for preference, did not consort with military men he recognized this one immediately. For it was none other than General Percival who had recently taken over the military command from General Bond (Bond's rival, Babington, had been replaced, too). But this General Percival, to Walter's bleary eye, looked a scarcely more encouraging prospect than his predecessor.

'Silly fool! Why don't you watch where you're going?' muttered Walter under his breath as he let go of the General and hurried on down the steps in search of his car.

Before he could find it, however, he recognized a familiar figure also in uniform approaching from the direction of the Victoria Memorial Hall. It was Ehrendorf. Walter hailed him and they exchanged a few words; Walter was barely able to conceal his impatience. He declined Ehrendorf's offer of a *stengah*, explaining that he must hurry to Mr Webb's bedside as it seemed that the old man's long resistance might now be coming to an end.

'By the way,' Walter permitted himself to enquire at last, 'did you hear any more about the new buying arrangements for the Reserve Company?'

'Why, yes, as a matter of fact.' Ehrendorf looked somewhat uncomfortable at the question. 'I guess I can rely on you to keep it to yourself!' Walter reassured him, trying to seem casual.

'Buying is to be centralized … no more private deals. All rubber exports to the United States are to be licensed. Licences will only be issued for shipping through the central buying agency and for fulfilling any outstanding forward contracts.'

'I see,' said Walter. 'That's interesting. Outstanding orders will go through? When will it begin?'

Ehrendorf did not know. 'In a few days, I suppose.'

Walter said goodbye to Ehrendorf and climbed into the back seat of the Bentley. 'Mohammed,' he said presently to the *syce*, 'I would like you to drop me at Collyer Quay and then to go to the Mayfair with a message for Major Archer. Tell him that I have been delayed by a very serious matter but will come as soon as I can.' He sat back, satisfied with his decision. It was one, he knew, with which old Mr Webb would have been in perfect sympathy.

As it turned out, although it was evening before Walter had at last finished sending cables and reached the Mayfair, there had been no particular need to hurry: his old friend and partner still had not succumbed. Nor, for that matter, did there appear to have been any great change in his condition. Mr Webb still lay there, breathing noisily in his illuminated tent of white muslin. The Major explained, however, that the old man had gone through a crisis of some sort about mid-day, had appeared restless, and several times had repeated the word 'sun' and a number of other words too garbled to be understood, at least by the Major.

'But the interesting thing was,' he told Walter, 'that Vera Chiang, who was here at the time, thought she understood that he was trying to say: "Sun Yat-sen".'

'Nonsense!' cried Walter. 'The old boy just wanted to go and prune his roses in the nude. He didn't give

tuppence for Sun Yat-sen.' And clapping the Major cheerfully on the back Walter strode off, chuckling, through the compound in the direction of his own house; but as he went a grim thought came stealing after him through the hushed garden and pounced on him before he had reached the safety of his own walls: 'This is how we all end up, mumbling rubbish to people who interpret it as they want!'

On the evenings that followed, while Mr Webb, now mute again, continued to lie there, and on through June, July and August of 1941, Walter's nostalgia for the old Singapore became acute. Perhaps this was paradoxical for in the old days, about which he was less and less able to resist holding forth to Major Archer at his dying partner's bedside, business had never boomed the way it was booming now. But in those days the atmosphere had been different, more relaxed … no, it was not simply youth, though being young undoubtedly had something to do with it. No, it was the place itself. Singapore had been different in those days. Business had been an adventure, not the grim striving for advantage it had become latterly. They had been as if on a different time scale: everything had seemed to happen more slowly, more comfortably.

Walter paused, staring up as if for enlightenment at the grey metallic blur of the ceiling fan and then down again at the billowing cocoon of the mosquito net within which lay old Mr Webb (soon to be hatched out into a better world). At one time in Singapore everyone had known everyone. Those were the days of great rambling colonial houses where the tradition of lavish hospitality lingered on from the nineteenth century. Ah well, all that had gone with the wind. In the course of time the bachelor messes, too, which the merchant houses kept going for their young chaps, had been replaced by blocks of flats. And once they had disappeared all the fun that young men used to have in the tropics had disappeared with them.

It was the development of Singapore as a great naval and military base which had started the rot. People who had no real connection with the country had flooded in. The Military had their uses, he went on, forgetting that the Major himself had been a military man in his day, but they were nomads, here today and gone tomorrow, never bothering to get to know the people or the country. What was the result of this influx? Simply that the old feeling of space and tranquillity which used to make Singapore such a pleasant place to live in had gone, and gone for ever.

'Sylvia and I used to motor thirty or forty miles sometimes in our pyjamas to have supper with friends in Johore. That's what I call a comfortable way to live!'

And the Major, though he would have preferred to discuss Japan's increasingly threatening attitude in the sphere of international politics, was obliged to confess that going to a dinnerparty in pyjamas did sound to him the very model of a life of contentment: obviously in those days there was no risk of meeting maddened hordes of strikers waving *parangs*.

The Singapore Club in the old days was not, declared Walter on another visit a few weeks later (forestalling the Major's attempt to ask him what he thought of Roosevelt's proposal, just announced, that French Indo-China should be considered a neutral country from which Japan could get food and raw materials; the Major had got on well with old Mr Webb and sorely missed his chairman's forceful views on perplexing world topics), no, it was not the mixing pot of all ages and conditions it had since become, no sir! Nowadays you might find yourself rubbing shoulders with any young twerp just out from England or some other fellow whose too careful public school accent might slip from time to time exposing heaven knew what dubious origins. But then it had been truly exclusive, the sort of place frequented by the older and more influential men in the Colony, reserved exclusively for males, of course, except for New Year's Day when ladies were invited for lunch to eat the traditional dish: Pheasant Lucullus! Yes, the Singapore Club used to be the lair of the *Tuan Besar*, like this poor old chap here, and it was quite a daunting prospect for a young man to go and visit him in it.

A mere two days later, as the Major, perfectly disconsolate at being deprived of his chairman and unable to settle down to the paper work awaiting him in a very empty-seeming office, was roaming the bungalow like a dog without its master, he once more came upon Walter who had somehow stolen into the building without being seen and was lurking at the old man's bedside.

'Singapore had a pride in herself in those days,' declared Walter, spotting the Major in the doorway, but then he hesitated, perhaps realizing that as an opening remark this might be considered odd. After a moment he cleared his throat and added: 'Everything is all right here, is it, Major? If you need any help let me know and I'll send someone down from the office.'

The Major agreed that everything was in order. Indeed, since Blackett and Webb managed the day-to-day running of the Mayfair there was little for him to do except play cards with Dupigny (for the Frenchman, now penniless and a refugee in overcrowded Singapore, had been given shelter in one of the Mayfair's many rooms) and at fixed hours to open up the recreation hut which old Mr Webb had patriotically built in the grounds for the troops flooding into the Colony (fortunately, no troops ever put in an appearance to make use of it). But though life had pursued its usual uneventful course at the headquarters of the Mayfair Rubber Company, there had been some alarming developments on the international scene: in response to the reported occupation by Japanese troops of the whole of Indo-China, America, Britain and Holland had frozen Japanese assets. One did not have to be an economist to see that this put Japan in a serious plight. Would this action make the Japanese see reason or would it light the blue-paper to a Far Eastern war? The Major was anxious to have Walter's opinion about this (he had already had Dupigny's which was deeply pessimistic, but then so were all Dupigny's opinions), but Walter, brushing aside this prospective clashing of continents, was impatient

to give the Major some idea of the pride that Singapore had had in herself. Lifting one corner of the mosquito net to peer at the grey, rigid form of his old friend he exclaimed: 'My word! Before the Great War we came second to none. After it, too, for a time.'

Taking the Major's arm he explained with a chuckle how the great Russian dancer, Pavlova, had come to Singapore expecting to find herself dancing at the Town Hall theatre, only to find that it had already been booked by the Amateur Dramatic Society. Her manager had suggested that the Amateur Dramatic Society would not mind postponing its performance of Gilbert and Sullivan so that the great ballerina, before whom grovelled the most refined, most perfumed, most diamond-glittering, evening-dressed audiences in the world, might dance on the best stage available in the Straits. Ah, but as it turned out the Amateur Dramatic Society did mind! They had their pride. They had been founded over a hundred years ago. They saw no reason why they should surrender the Victoria Hall to a foreign artiste … and so she had to go off and make the best of a cramped little stage at the old German Club. And Walter laughed so long and loud that the ceiling rang with his laughter and even the melancholy Major looked amused … but had Walter's laughter concealed a muffled cry from the direction of the mosquito net? The Major cast an uneasy glance in that direction. A strange rictus was twisting the old man's lips. A mumbled cry broke from them which might have been: 'Sun Yatsen!' (or might not, it was hard to tell).

The Major freed himself from Walter's grasp. It surely could not be … or could it? With an exclamation the Major sprang to his chairman's side, whipping aside the film of mosquito netting. But too late! That smile or grimace, whichever it had been, that strangled cry, whatever it had meant, had been his last.

'Young Matthew will be too late after all,' observed Walter sadly. 'And he's due to arrive any day now.'

>'If you have an hour to spare,' Walter said to Joan on the following day, 'I should like to show you something.'

Together father and daughter installed themselves in the back of the Bentley. Walter had evidently already given instructions to the *syce* for they set off without more ado in the direction of the river. Walter was more silent and subdued than usual and Joan found this whole expedition somewhat mysterious. 'Where are we going?' she asked.

'To look at a warehouse,' he replied briefly but said no more. Only when the motor-car was nudging its way along the crowded streets beside the river did Walter again break his silence, to ask Joan if she had seen Ehrendorf.

'No. I've finished with him,' said Joan with a smile.

'Ah,' said Walter. 'Good enough.' He leaned forward to tap the *syce* on the shoulder. With considerable difficulty on account of the lorries being loaded and unloaded at the wharves where lighters and *tong-kangs* clustered several deep they had reached a tall brick godown at a bend in the river. Apart from the fact that it was built of brick in a conservative style and bore an inscription in white letters: *Blackett and Webb Limited*, recently repainted for the jubilee celebrations, there was nothing very remarkable about it.

'You may wonder why I brought you here,' said Walter, smiling now. 'As you see, it's just a godown, nothing very special. But to me this building is rather important because it's the first we put up here in Singapore and, incidentally, an exact replica of Webb's first building in Rangoon. I used to come here a lot and day-dream as a young man. Not that old Webb used to give me much time for day-dreaming. There's a little office up above … Let's go up if you don't mind getting your frock dusty.'

They stepped through a small door cut in the massive wooden gates facing the road. After the heat and sunshine of the road it seemed dark and cool inside. Dust sparkled in a shaft of sunlight which blazed at their feet and cast a dim light back over the rest of the cavernous building, illuminating the bales of rubber which rose around them.

'I used to think I'd bring Monty here one day but I doubt if he'd understand what the place means to me.'

They climbed a swaying ladder, Joan going first, to a dim ledge that hung in the shadows above them. As he followed her Walter noticed his daughter's strong thighs beneath her frock and thought: 'Yes, she's a real Blackett. She has pluck. Her mother would never climb a ladder like that.' When he had reached the ledge Walter led the way through a maze of rubber bales to a little store-keeper's office with a window over the river. 'Here we are,' he announced. 'This is my little nest. You have the chair. I'll sit on the table. Well, my dear, the reason I asked you to come here isn't only sentimental, though that may be part of it. The fact is that the business is at a crossroads now that Mr Webb is dead and I am going to need your help. As you know, Matthew Webb who is due out here shortly will inherit his father's share of the business. Well, we don't know what he's like exactly but as far as I can make out he's a somewhat muddled person. We don't want him rocking the boat, therefore … No, Joan, just let me finish … therefore it would suit me, putting it in a nut-shell, and I hope you won't mind me suggesting this … it would suit me if he found you as attractive as, let's say, his chum Ehrendorf does … Yes, in a moment, Joan, but please let me have my say first. Now I want you to understand that I'm not asking you for anything more, though I shall be pleased if you find a good husband one of these days … Just make him find you attractive, I'm sure I don't have to tell you *how* although … and this is something that I have never told anyone, not even your mother … the one sure way that a woman can make a man lose his head is by *blowing hot and cold*, you know the sort of thing, loving one moment,

indifferent the next, that sort of feminine way of carrying on is something, let me tell you straight, that a man finds irresistible Well, there you are, but before you give me your answer just let me repeat two things. Firstly, the business could well be vulnerable to foolish behaviour by Matthew Webb and, secondly, you don't have to marry him if you don't want to. It will be enough if you get him under your thumb for a couple of years. There!'

'But Father!' exclaimed Joan, laughing and jumping up from her chair to give her father a hug. 'How old-fashioned you are to deliver such a speech! I took it for granted long ago that you'd want me to marry Matthew for the sake of the firm. And the answer is "yes", of course. I don't care what he's like! You took such a long time to pop the question. I was beginning to think you'd never ask!'

13

On account of the hazards of war-time, the convoys that were diverted without explanation, the passenger vessels that were commandeered for the movement of troops, the seats on aeroplanes usurped at the last moment by august officials, not to mention the spies that lurked everywhere and studied every mortal thing that moved on the face of the earth through field-glasses *or* kept their treacherous ears open while quaffing pints in dockside pubs, Matthew Webb had been frustrated again and again in his efforts to reach Singapore. The result was that the month of November was already well advanced before he found himself on the last stages of his journey. By that time, though his impending arrival had not been forgotten by the Blacketts (Walter brooded on it constantly and so, presumably, did Joan), it had assumed less momentous proportions than in the first days after Mr Webb's death. Walter could see the matter now more in perspective, for the old man had been buried for almost a month, sad news which had been conveyed to Matthew in Colombo where he had been stranded interminably until Walter could pull a string or two with the RAF. Moreover, in the frenzied commercial atmosphere of Singapore at the time, exacerbated by the bewildering arrival of more and yet more troops from Australia and India, who could manage to spare time for such domestic, or dynastic, matters, or even, if it comes to that, think of the same thing for two moments running? But at last Matthew was about to arrive.

The Avro Anson which for an hour or more had been following the wandering dark-green edge of the coast now swung out to sea before turning north-west in a wide curve that would bring it back over Singapore. For a few moments nothing could be seen but an expanse of water so dazzling that it hurt Matthew's eyes as he looked down on it from the cabin window. Then, as the Anson floated in over the harbour in which lay three grey warships and a multitude of other vessels, over the railway station with its track curving away across the island to the Causeway, and over a number of miniature buildings scarcely big enough to house a colony of fleas, it began to wobble in a dreadful, sickening fashion, and to lose height. Presently, the Singapore River (which was really nothing but a tidal creek) crept from under the wing, ominously bulging near its mouth like a snake which had just swallowed a rabbit and then trailing back inland to the thinnest of tails on the far side of the city.

Next there came an open green space on which a fleas' cricket match was taking place and then the toy spire of a cathedral, aptly set at the intersection of diagonal paths forming the cross of St Andrew, with one or two flea-worshippers scurrying over its green sward to offer up their evening prayers, for the sun, though still brightly fingering the cabin of the aircraft, was already casting deep shadows over the cathedral lawns … But again the plane dropped sickeningly and the wing on one side tilted up in the most alarming way, so that even though Matthew continued to look *down* he could still see nothing but sky. This dismaying sensation continued until the plane had completed a full circle and was coming in from the sea again with level wings. But even so, every few moments the floor would seem to drop away and when Matthew tried to interest himself, as a diversion, in MacFadyean's *History of the Rubber Industry* which lay open on his lap, he was promptly obliged to jettison even this light work from his thoughts, simply to keep the plane airborne.

By now they were distressingly near the surface. He saw waves, then a junk floating past the cabin window with a thick-veined sail, then a flotsam of human heads and waving hands. Somehow or other the wheels cleared the roof of the swimming club at Tanjong Rhu (Matthew would have thought they were too low to have cleared anything at all). A few more perilous wobbles and the wheels consented to touch down with a bump and a brief howl, followed by another bump as the tail touched. The journey had been a strain: he had never been up in an aeroplane before. But now he felt relieved and pleased with himself; soon he would be describing the experience to his earthbound friends.

'Don't forget to watch out for the Singapore Grip!' shouted one of the crew after him in a clamour of cheerful goodbyes and laughter as he jumped stiffly to the ground.

Now he found himself standing on the tarmac, a little unsteadily on account of the equatorial gale from the still turning propellors. Uncertain which way to walk he peered around in the haze of evening sunlight. The heat was suddenly stifling: he was clad in it from head to toe, as if wrapped in steaming towels.

A figure in a white flannel suit was hurrying towards him into the slip-stream, trouser legs flapping, jacket ballooning and one large hand clapped on to a khaki sun-helmet to keep it on his head. The other hand was held out even from some yards' distance towards Matthew who, a moment later, found himself shaking it.

'You're Matthew Webb, aren't you? I'm Monty Blackett. I expect you've heard of me … Hm, now let me see, I don't think we have met before, have we? Never mind, anyway. It doesn't make any difference. We'll get to know each other in a jiffy, I expect. Can't very well help it in a hole like this.' Monty was a burly young man about the same age as Matthew but his face had a heavy-set appearance which made him look older: an impression reinforced when he removed his sunhelmet for a moment to scratch his head by the fact that his hair was receding. Matthew wondered whether the black tie he was wearing, which had been blown back over his shoulder, was a mark of respect for his father or merely conventional Singapore attire.

After the two young men had exchanged greetings, which they had to shout because of the noise from the engines, there was an awkward pause between them.

'Look, it's been raining,' Matthew shouted, nodding at the shivering pools of rainwater that lay here and there on the tarmac; at the same time he smiled at himself, thinking that that was not what he had meant to say at all.

'What?' bellowed Monty, stepping forward and giving Matthew an odd look. 'Yes, I'll say it has, it rains almost every bloody day at the moment, I'll have you know. Come on now,' he added, 'enough of the weather.' He took Matthew's arm to steer him away from that whining aeroplane which only then agreed to arrest its motors with a few last chugs and swishes. 'Well, well, same old Matthew,' he chuckled cautiously, though, strictly speaking, he could not have known very much about the 'old Matthew' at all, since they had never met before. Once more he darted an odd, sideways look at Matthew as if trying to weigh him up, while, still chuckling vaguely, he conducted him to the terminal building, a surprisingly up-to-date construction with control tower and observation decks, somewhat resembling a cinema. Matthew remarked on its modern appearance. Singapore must be quite …

'Oh yeah,' agreed Monty indifferently. Brightening a little, he added: 'They have a restaurant there. You don't feel like some oysters, do you? They fly them in from Hawkesbury River in Australia. Look, that's not such a bad idea …'

'Well, not just at the moment, thanks,' said Matthew, surprised. Monty's enthusiasm subsided with a grimace. Matthew, still groping for a topic of conversation, said: 'I must say, I don't know how you stand this heat.'

'Heat? This is the coolest part of the day. Wait and see how hot it *can* get here. I say, is something the matter?' For Matthew had suddenly stiffened.

'I think that man is making off with my bags.' Like many people whose natural inclination is to think the best of people Matthew found it necessary, when travelling, to remain dramatically on the alert to defend himself against malefactors.

'He bloody well better had be,' grinned Monty. 'Otherwise he'll get hell from me!'

'You mean …?'

'Of course. He's our *syce* … you know, chauffeur. Now don't worry, old boy. Just trust old Monty. Everything's organized. Come on, Sis is waiting for us in the car …' And with that he led the way out of the building uttering a strange, smothered groan as he went. Matthew hurried after him, filled with pleasure at the prospect of seeing little Kate, to whom he had taken a considerable liking in the course of their one short meeting.

'Monty, I must thank you for getting me on that plane. Otherwise I might have been stuck in Ceylon for ever, what with the war and so forth.'

'Think nothing of it. We just pulled a few of the right strings and it was a stroke of luck that there happened to be an empty plane coming our way. You see, the point is this …'

Now they had reached the motor-car and Monty broke off to give the driver some instructions. The latter murmured: 'Yes, *Tuan*,' and stowed Matthew's suitcases in the back of the vehicle; this was a huge open Pontiac with white tyres, a wide running-board and deep leather seats. A young woman whom Matthew failed to recognize was half reclining on the back seat, holding a cigarette holder in a studied pose. She was wearing a simple white cotton frock and a green turban with two knots which stood up, Hollywood style, like a rabbit's ears. The haft of a tennis racket was gripped between her bare calves and its glimmering strings between her pretty, pink knees. She ignored Matthew's greeting and said to Monty: 'Let's scram before I die of heat.' Matthew, disappointed to find this person instead of Kate, tried not to stare at her: this must be Joan Blackett, Kate's elder sister. Kate had spoken of her as of a superior being, sophisticated beyond measure, terrorizing the young men of the Colony with her irresistible appeal, breaking hearts with as little compunction as if they had been chipped dinner-plates.

'But the point is this …' Monty was repeating, a trifle more sonorously than before, now that they were comfortably installed in the Pontiac one on each side of Joan. There was another pause, however, while the young men each lit a Craven A.

'The point is this,' he said yet again, puffing out an authoritative cloud of blue smoke. As he did so, Matthew found himself wondering whether Monty Blackett might not on occasion be ever so slightly ponderous and self-important, and though, of course, it had been kind of Monty to come and meet him, nevertheless, an ungrateful voice whispered in Matthew's ear: 'What *is* the point?' and he glanced quickly at Joan to see whether she was sharing his impatience. But she was looking moodily in another direction… towards the wind-sock waltzing impatiently in the breeze at the end of the aerodrome, or towards a large American limousine with Stars and Stripes fluttering from its bonnet which had come into the airport drive at great speed with a squeal of tyres as it negotiated the bend but was now nosing uncertainly in the direction of the terminal building while the driver made up his mind which way to go. Presently, she turned her turbaned profile and her grey eyes fixed themselves intently on his face. He stirred uneasily.

'The point is, Matthew, that at the moment the blighters are so anxious for our rubber that they go out of their way to help whenever they can. They're not usually so helpful, I can assure you. And it doesn't stop the bloody bureaucrats, those clever merchants in Whitehall, making a nuisance of themselves whenever they get

the chance. We're constantly battling with penpushers in some ministry or other a few thousands miles away.' He added sententiously: 'You'll soon find that out when you have a look at the files in your father's office. Now what's all this? What does this cove want?'

While Monty had been speaking the American limousine which had been prowling about uncertainly for a while had at last made up its mind to approach the Pontiac. It came to a stop beside them and an American soldier slid out from behind the wheel and held the door open.

'Oh lumme, it's him,' said Monty, glancing at Joan.

'Great Scott!' exclaimed Matthew. 'I know that bloke. We were at Oxford together. His name's Jim Ehrendorf … He's a really wonderful fellow, you must meet him. I was meaning to try and look him up when I got here and now … but wait a sec … Of course, you already know him, don't you?' And Matthew clapped a hand to his brow.

'Yes, we do,' said Monty. 'The thing is …' But without waiting to hear what the thing was, Matthew had leaped out of the Pontiac and was warmly shaking hands with the smiling Ehrendorf. They exchanged a few words, both talking at once. Joan and Monty watched them blankly from the motor-car.

'I thought I wouldn't get here in time,' Ehrendorf was saying as they turned back towards the Pontiac, 'and I'm tied up for the rest of the day. In fact, I wouldn't have heard you were arriving at all if it hadn't been for the chance of meeting up with Walter downtown. Hiya Monty, Hiya Joan!'

'Hiya,' said Monty. Joan showed no more sign of acknowledging Ehrendorf's presence than she had Matthew's. She looked irritable and said again: 'For God's sake, let's scram … It's so hot.'

'How pretty you look, Joan, in your *vêtement de sport*,' said Ehrendorf in a way that managed to be both casual and rather tense. ' "Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?" '

'I'd far rather you didn't, if you don't mind,' replied Joan sullenly. 'Let's go, for God's sake.'

'I know his type,' said Matthew. 'Next thing, he'll be trying to tell you you're "more lovely and more temperate".' Both he and Ehrendorf laughed but the two Blacketts did not share their amusement; indeed they both looked rather put out.

Ehrendorf continued to stand uncertainly beside the motorcar, gazing at Joan, who looked away petulantly. Matthew took out a handkerchief, removed his glasses and mopped his streaming face. The heat was dreadful, despite the breeze and the approach of night.

'I've got it,' said Ehrendorf. 'Why don't I ride in with you guys. I'll tell my driver to follow and then I can go on from there.' Without waiting for approval Ehrendorf spoke to his driver and then installed himself in the front seat of the Pontiac. Matthew climbed in beside Joan again.

Now the Pontiac was in motion at last; an air of interrogation, of words unspoken, formed over it as it swung out of the aerodrome gates. From near at hand there suddenly came a clamour of music, laughter and singing. A thousand coloured lights twinkled in the gathering dusk through a grove of trees that lay just to their right in the fork of the two roads. Keeling over like a yacht tacking against the wind the Pontiac turned away from the lights on to the Kallang Road.

'That's one of the sights,' Monty said, pointing back with his cigarette shedding sparks. 'A sort of funfair called The Happy World. They're going to catch hell, though, unless they do something about blacking out those lights.'

'There's a better place called The Great World on Kim Seng Road on the other side of town,' said Ehrendorf, turning to grin at Matthew. 'You'll be able to dance with lovely taxi-girls there. Twenty-five cents a throw.'

Matthew decided not to ask for the moment what a 'taxi-girl' was. Instead he said: 'You didn't have that natty moustache in Geneva, did you, Jim? And what have you done to your hand?' For Ehrendorf, though he no longer wore a bandage, still had plaster around his fingers. But to Matthew's surprise these questions only seemed to embarrass Ehrendorf (was he sensitive about his moustache?) who murmured vaguely that it was nothing, he'd stupidly burned himself a few weeks earlier, and then, without further comment, turned his evidently sensitive moustache to face forward again while he examined the road ahead through the windscreen.

Meanwhile the Pontiac had howled over a bridge and was careering through the twilight at an alarming speed. Every now and then as an obstruction loomed up the driver would brake and swerve violently. The horn blared without pause. The blurred forms of rickshaws, motor-cars and bullock-carts receded rapidly on either side. Once, to avoid a traffic jam which suddenly presented itself, they mounted a verge and without slackening speed thrashed through some sort of vegetation, evidently someone's garden.

'Good God!' thought Matthew. 'Do they always drive like this?'

'People in Britain seem to find it amazing,' Monty was saying, his thoughts still on their earlier conversation, 'that we should know more about running the rubber business than they do in Whitehall. What they don't seem to realize is that if we suffer here in Singapore, everything suffers, and that includes their wizard War Effort. It's so hard to get anything done with these bloody civil servants. Sometimes I wonder if they haven't all got infantile paralysis!' And Monty bent his wrist, hunched his shoulders and twisted his face into a highly amusing imitation of a cripple. But Matthew found it hard to smile: he had somehow never found imitations of cripples very entertaining. Monty did not notice this lack of response, however, and shed a great bark of laughter into the humid, sweltering twilight.

Becoming serious again Monty said, pointing at a group of dim buildings on the left: 'That's the Firestone

factory where last summer's strikes were started by the Commies. Thanks to the bungling of our little men in the Government they very nearly turned it into a general strike.' Matthew, who had been beginning to fear that he and Monty might have no common interest, became attentive and ventured to remark that he was interested, not only in political strikes and the relations of native workers to European employers, but also in … well, the 'colonial experience' as a whole. But Monty's response was disappointing.

'Oh, you're interested in the "colonial experience", are you?' he mumbled indifferently. 'Well, you've come to the right place. You'll get a basinful of it here, all right.'

Ehrendorf glanced round quickly but without catching Matthew's eye. His glance, indeed, got no further than Joan's tennis racket still tightly gripped between her knees as she lolled back against the leather seat: he stared at the racket with great intensity, but only for a moment. Then his moustache was dividing the breeze again.

For some time the spinning back and forth of the Pontiac's steering-wheel as they swerved to avoid other vehicles had caused the three young people on the back seat to sway from side to side. Joan, because she was in the middle and had less to hold on to, tended to slide more than the others and already once or twice Matthew had found himself pressed against her soft body while she struggled to recover. Now, however, as the Pontiac negotiated a wide curve with muttering tyres and Joan was once more thrown up against him, she appeared to abandon the unequal struggle: she simply lay against him with her head on his shoulder. Matthew wondered whether to push her off but decided it might not seem polite: better to wait for a curve in the opposite direction to do the job for him. In a few moments the car straightened its course again, which should have allowed her to slide back towards her brother, but to his surprise she remained where she was, sprawled against him. And even when, presently, off-side tyres howling like souls in torment, they entered a curve in the opposite direction, she still remained firmly glued to his side, as if all the laws of physics had been suspended in her favour. Then he really did begin to wonder, because that surely could not be right.

Matthew licked his lips, perplexed. He was not quite sure what to make of it all. The truth was that he felt too hot already without having someone pressed against him. He was very much tempted to shove her away to allow the air to circulate. Not that he found the sensation of her body against him altogether disagreeable, he had to admit. But still, it was a bit awkward. Ah, now he caught a tantalizing breath of French perfume on the rushing tropical evening.

'Watch out for that tennis racket, Sis,' said Monty with a leer.

Matthew glanced at the turbaned head beside him but Joan showed no sign of having heard her brother's remark. Nor had Ehrendorf apparently. At any rate, only the neatly barbered back of his head continued to be visible.

Thinking that perhaps some conversation might revive Joan sufficiently to unglue her from his side Matthew asked: 'Does anyone happen to know what the Singapore Grip is? The RAF blokes in the plane kept telling me to watch out for it but they wouldn't tell me what it actually *was*!' But as a conversational opening this proved a failure. Nobody replied or showed any sign of having heard. 'How deuced odd they all are!' thought Matthew crossly. 'And what's the matter with Jim Ehrendorf?' He was tired from his journey, too tired to make an effort with people who were not prepared to make an effort *back*.

Monty, meanwhile, had pulled the brim of his sun-helmet over his eyes, turned up his collar, stuck his cigarette in the corner of his mouth and was saying in a hoarse, gangster voice: 'Keep your heads down, you guys. The men from the Ministry of Supply are after us!' Again the Pontiac shed a great bark of laughter as it raced on into the city, leaving it to float behind among the padding rickshaw coolies who formed a slow stream on either side of the road.

14

Weariness caused Matthew to give up the struggle for a while; he merely lay back against the sighing leather-clad springs. He could not think what was the matter with Ehrendorf who might have been hypnotized the way he continued to gaze stolidly at the road ahead: this was quite unlike the gay and talkative person Matthew had known in Oxford and Geneva.

'I suppose everyone here is worried about these talks with the Japs in Washington,' he said presently, hoping again to initiate a conversation. But Ehrendorf still made no reply and Monty, who did not appear to have heard of them, merely asked: 'What talks?'

Surprised, Matthew explained that Admiral Nomura, the Japanese Ambassador in Washington, had been having talks with the American Government. The Americans wanted the Japs to move their troops out of Indo-China and to agree to peace in the Pacific; the Japs wanted the Americans to stop helping Chiang Kai-shek in their war against China and to unfreeze their assets. Things would look grim if they didn't agree. That was why he had expected that people in Singapore might be worried.

'I suppose some people may have the wind up,' said Monty indifferently.

Matthew decided to give up once more and let events take their course. While he lay slumped in the corner of the seat with a young woman sprawled on his shoulder like a hot compress, one curious picture after another trembled before his eyes, reminding him of the 'magic lantern' he had played with as a child. One

moment the Pontiac was grumbling and nudging its way through a narrow street hung with banners of Chinese ideographs, the next it was speeding down a wide avenue between silver slopes which flashed and winked at him and proved to be great banks of fish (Matthew was glad of the speed: the stench was so powerful it made you clutch your collar and roll your eyeballs back into your brain). He peered in wonder at the glistening naked bodies of the men working by oil lamps to gut and salt these silvery Himalayas of fish but the next moment again the Pontiac had transformed itself into a stately barge forging it way over a smoky, azure river … Here and there Chinese waded head and shoulders above the blue billows, which presently grew transparent and correspondingly thickened into a darker blue empyrean hanging a few feet overhead; through this blue canopy, like cherubim, disembodied Chinese heads peered down from balconies at the Pontiac making its slow progress beneath.

'This is the street of the charcoal burners. The bloody Chinese live fifty to a room here in some places.'

Now the clouds of smoke had rolled away to reveal that they were in another, quite different street where from every window and balcony there swung pots of ferns and baskets of flowers. Strings of dim, multi-coloured lanterns hung everywhere. 'It's time this lot got weaving with their black-out, too,' said Monty, and his eyes glittered like cutlery as they roved the balconies above. Suddenly Matthew saw that in the heart of each display of lanterns and flowers there was a beautiful woman set like a jewel.

'Did we have to come this way, Monty?' grumbled Joan, removing herself from Matthew's shoulder. 'Why didn't we go along Beach Road?' Ehrendorf stirred at last and looked around with an uncomfortable smile; meanwhile, the Pontiac continued to advance with Joan firmly sandwiched between the two perspiring Englishmen on the back seat. Certain of the women on the balconies above stuck languorous poses, or stretched out a slender leg as if to straighten a stocking. One idly lifted her skirt as if to check that her underwear was all in order (alas, she appeared to have forgotten it altogether); another forced a breast to bulge out of its hiding and palped it thoughtfully.

'Look here, Monty,' Joan protested, 'this is a bit thick. You did this on purpose.'

'Did what on purpose?'

'You know perfectly well. And it's not very clever.'

'In Singapore you can see things they don't mention at posh finishing schools,' exulted Monty, 'but that's no reason to get in a bate.' He added for Matthew's benefit: 'This is respectable compared with Lavender Street yonder where the troops go. You could have a "colonial experience" there all right!'

So wide was the Pontiac, so narrow the streets of this part of the city, that it was a miracle they could pass through them at all. Even so, they frequently had to slow to a walking pace while the *syce* made some fine decisions, an inch on this side, an inch on that. On one such occasion a figure sprang suddenly out of the twilight and landed with a thump on the running-board causing Matthew to flinch back, startled. But the figure proved to be only a small bundle of skin and bone wrapped in rags, a Chinese boy of six or seven years of age. This child clung to the side of the motor-car with one small grubby hand while he cupped the other under Matthew's nose, at the same time dancing up and down on the running-board with a dreadful urgency. But more distressing still, the boy began a rapid, artificial panting like that of a wounded animal.

The Pontiac had cleared the last of the narrow streets and could now accelerate … but still the child clung on, panting more desperately than ever. Meanwhile, the *syce* was steering with one hand and using the other to reach behind Ehrendorf and hammer at the little fingers gripping the chassis.

'Stop!' cried Matthew to the driver. 'Stop! … Make him stop!' he shouted at Ehrendorf. But Ehrendorf sat as if in a trance while the Pontiac hurtled through the dusk swaying violently, the child panting, the *syce* cursing and hammering.

'No father, no mother, no *makan*, no whisky soda!' howled the child.

Monty had calmly selected a couple of coins from his pocket and was holding them out, almost in the child's reach, and making him grab for them with his free hand. Having enjoyed this game for a little he negligently tossed the coins out of the speeding car. A moment later the boy dropped off the running-board and vanished into the rushing darkness in their wake.

'That's one of their favourite tricks. The word *makan* means "grub" by the way, and you could probably do with some yourself, I should think. We thought we'd take you first to the Mayfair to leave your things and then on to our house for some supper.'

They were now on a wider thoroughfare; in front of them rattled a green trolley-bus: from the tips of its twin poles a cascade of blue-white sparks dribbled against the darkening sky. Despite the advance of darkness the heat seemed only to increase. The sun had long since dropped out of sight somewhere behind Sumatra to the west but in the sky it had left a vast striated blanket of magenta which seemed to radiate a heat of its own like the bars of an electric grill.

Soon they were on a long straight road, still lined with Chinese shophouses but with here and there an occasional block of European shops or offices. This was Orchard Road, Monty explained, and that drive that curved away to the right led up to Government House. The large white building a little further along was the Cold Storage: in there homesick Britons could buy food that reminded them of home.

Presently they turned off Orchard Road and found themselves in a residential district of winding, tree-lined streets and detached bungalows with now and then a small block of flats set amidst tennis courts. They lurched up a sharply curving slope past a tiny banana plot.

‘It may not be much … but given the hordes of brass hats commandeering living quarters in Singapore these days one is lucky to find a roof at all. Here we are, anyway.’

The Pontiac keeled over sharply and pulled off the road with groaning tyres. The Mayfair Building was a vast and rambling bungalow built on a score of fat, square pillars. Because the ground here was on something of a slope these pillars grew taller as they approached the front of the building, exaggerating their perspective and giving them the appearance of a platoon on the march beneath an enormous burden. The bungalow itself was encased in louvred wooden shutters and open balconies, along the sides of which partly unrolled blinds of split-bamboo hung beneath the great jutting eaves. The apex of the bungalow’s roof of loose red tiles was left open in the manner of a dovecot to allow warm air to escape, and was crowned by a second, smaller roof of red tiles. Despite the metropolitan grandeur of its name the Mayfair Building had a slightly decrepit air.

While Joan performed a quick and efficient inspection of herself in a hand-mirror, Matthew got out of the car and prepared to follow Monty.

‘I won’t come in with you, Matthew,’ Ehrendorf said. ‘I’m busy right now but I’ll see you later. We’ll get together real soon, OK?’ Now that he, too, had got out of the car and stood there, an elegant figure in his uniform, it seemed to Matthew that he looked more his former cheerful and confident self. They shook hands, agreed to telephone each other and then Matthew followed Monty around the side of the building to the main entrance. Here he glimpsed a tennis court, disused, from whose baked mud surface giant thistles had grown up and now waited like silent skeleton players in the gloom. Beyond the tennis court the compound was walled in on each side by a powerful tropical undergrowth and the encroaching jungle.

Gesturing in the darkness Monty said: ‘There’s a recreation hut and a lot of gym stuff over there. I expect you know that your father was keen on that sort of thing? What? You didn’t? He was very partial to rippling muscles and gleaming torsos.’ Monty chuckled cautiously. ‘This way. Watch your step.’

They made their way up protesting wooden steps to a front door that stood open and was plainly two or three inches too big for its frame. As Monty dragged it open further the hinges shrieked. He went inside. Matthew, having paused to polish his glasses, was about to follow him when he heard a faint scuffling sound from the darkness on the other side of the house. He heard the sound of heavy, indignant breathing, then silence followed and, after a few moments, a long, melancholy sigh, barely audible against the hum of the tropical night. In another moment he heard footsteps and Joan emerged from the gloom.

The interior of the bungalow exuded the unloved air of houses that have had to endure temporary occupation by a succession of transient lodgers. Matthew surmised that his father had not taken a great interest in his material surroundings.

‘What a dump!’ said Joan, wrinkling her perfect nose as she peered in.

‘It’s seen better days, I admit,’ agreed Monty. In the obscurity Matthew sensed rather than saw that the furiture was chipped, the paintwork peeling and the woodwork so warped that drawers and cupboards would no longer quite open, nor windows altogether close. He was surprised to think that it was in these modest surroundings that his father, a man of wealth, had spent so much of the latter part of his life. ‘Perhaps the old chap was not such an ogre after all.’

As he advanced into a wide verandah room scattered with darker masses which might be furniture, two floorboards sang in counterpoint under his shoes. A middle-aged man who had evidently been brooding by himself on the verandah in the now almost complete darkness came on a serpentine course through the sagging rattan furniture to meet them, snapping on a light switch as he passed and bathing the room in an electric light which at first flickered like a cinema projector but presently settled down to a more steady glow.

‘Major Brendan Archer,’ said Monty casting his sun-helmet away into the shadows. ‘This is Matthew Webb.’ He added to Matthew: ‘The Major has been more or less running things since your father’s illness.’

Matthew and the Major shook hands. The Major came vaguely to attention and said indistinctly: ‘I’d like to say how sorry … hm … your father …’ With a muffled bark indicating emotion he stood at ease again The Major had a mild, vaguely worried appearance. His very thin hair had been carefully smoothed with water and brushed straight back, revealing only the finest of partings. It was supplemented by a rather doleful moustache.

‘I see you’re looking at my moustache,’ the Major said, causing Matthew to start guiltily. ‘That blighter Cheong got at it with the scissors. He said he’d be careful but of course he got carried away. Took too much off one side.’ It was true. The Major’s moustache, when you looked at it, was definitely lopsided. The young people peered at it respectfully.

‘How sensitive people are about their moustaches out here, thought Matthew. ‘It must be the climate.’

‘Why don’t you prune the other side a bit?’ suggested Monty. ‘Even it up?’

‘Mustn’t look like Hitler.’

‘No, of course not,’ agreed Monty. To Matthew he explained: ‘The Major’s been trying to re-enlist for active service. He can’t be bothered with the Japs. Defend the old homeland, eh, Major?’

‘Oh, I’m afraid the war will be over by the time I get back to England. One worries, you know, about people at home in the air-raids. I have a couple of young nieces in London … well, not really nieces … more god-daughters than nieces, in South Kensington, actually, though strictly speaking …’

Monty interrupted: ‘You don’t say so, Major? I’ve heard that the entire might of the Luftwaffe is being thrown against South Kensington.’ To Matthew he said: ‘Come on, I’ll show you around quickly and then we’ll

beetle off.' They left the Major looking baffled.

'Old bore,' said Monty.

As they made their way round the bungalow Matthew was conscious of Joan's blank eyes and neatly plucked eyebrows turning towards him from time to time, but she still had not addressed a word directly to him. Swinging louvred shutters divided one room from the next, there seemed to be no doors here except for the bathroom and one elaborately marked 'Board of Directors'. They peered into his room which contained nothing except a long, deeply scratched table and a dozen or so chairs. Above the table a huge electric fan laboured noisily. Monty switched on the light at the door. A wiry, middle-aged man clad only in shorts lay stretched on the table, asleep with his mouth open. Monty led the way over to inspect him, saying: 'This is Dupigny. I gather he's supposed to have some sort of job here, God knows what, though. Hey, wake up!' Monty shook him. 'François is what is known as a "sleeping partner",' he jeered. 'Come on, wake up! The Japs have landed in the garden!' But the man on the table merely uttered a groan and turned over. They retreated, Monty saying over his shoulder: 'François used to be a big-wig in the Indo-Chinese Government until Pétain booted him out. He's convinced Jap parachutists are going to land any moment.'

Now at last they were approaching the rooms which had been set aside for the Chairman: a swinging door upholstered in green felt had once divided this part of the bungalow from the rest but now, removed from its hinges, it was merely propped against the wall. Beyond it, nevertheless, one could discern an improvement in the quality and condition of the furnishings. First, they came to an outer room used as an office. Matthew had expected a room that was perfectly bleak and bare of ornament, to match his own view of his father's character. To his surprise the walls were crowded with pictures and photographs of all kinds. He barely had time to glance at them; besides, the presence of the young Blacketts inhibited him. But what was he to make of this sepia photograph showing his father perhaps thirty years ago, holding a tennis racket and with his arm cheerfully around the neck of his smiling partner or opponent? Or of this one of his father good-humouredly presenting something to a group of neatly suited Chinese, each of them with his trousers at half mast? Surely the old tyrant had not smiled more than once in his entire life!

They peered into the bedroom which lay beyond, a great high-ceilinged room which contained two massive Edwardian wardrobes, a narrow iron bed with a mosquito net hanging knotted above it like a furled sail, and a bedside table on which medicine bottles still crowded around the stem of a table-light. Matthew, harrowed by the sight of these medicine bottles, withdrew to the office once more. Joan had remained in the background plucking with finger and thumb at the back of her turban. The driver had brought in Matthew's suitcases and now carried them into the bedroom.

'There should be a Chinese boy around somewhere. He'll unpack for you. Let's go and get something to eat.'

A balding young man was hovering diffidently at the door of the office as they passed through. He cleared his throat when he saw Monty and said: 'Monty, I wonder could I have a quick word with you?'

'No, you bloody can't. I'm busy. And what are you doing here, anyway? You're supposed to be out on the bloody estate. We don't pay you to hang around Singapore.'

'I just came in this evening, Monty. You see, it's rather important and I had already mentioned it some time ago to Mr Webb before his illness …'

'You just came in this evening, did you, Turner? Well, you can bugger off back this evening, too. If you aren't satisfied with your pay you can send us a letter of resignation and join the bloody Army. Got it?'

'But I've just spoken to Major Archer and he …'

'I don't care who you've spoken to. I'm telling you to hop it. Get going. Scram!'

'I could eat a horse,' said Joan suddenly, addressing Matthew for the first time and even smiling at him. 'I only had a sandwich at the Cold Storage for lunch. Actually, I'm trying to lose weight. How much do you think I weigh? Go on, have a guess.' Matthew could only blink at her, however, too astonished to reply.

The young man's face had turned very pale and his forehead glistened with perspiration: there was clearly nothing for it but for him to depart, and he did so, but without making any abrupt movement. His image seemed gradually to grow indistinct until presently one could make out pieces of furniture where he had been standing and then he had faded away completely.

'Eight stone exactly!' exclaimed Joan in triumph, clapping her hands. 'I knew you couldn't. Nobody can. You see, it's partly the way I dress.'

'That miserable cove,' Monty explained in a self-satisfied tone, 'is Robin Turner, the manager of your estate in Johore, though you'd hardly think so the amount of time he spends in Singapore. That little so-and-so and I were at school together and I pulled a few strings to get him a job out here when jobs weren't easy to come by. What d'you know? Within a couple of years he'd got himself married to a *stengah* and his career out here was as good as finished.'

'A *stengah?*'

'Half one thing and half the other … a Eurasian … a mixed drink! You can tell 'em by their chichi accent … sing-song like Welsh. He's been trying to get her a job as a governess in a white household but nobody wants their kids to end up with that accent … no fear! In this part of the world, Matthew, people don't mind who you have your fun with, provided you do it discreetly (they're pretty broad-minded about that), but they get shirty if you try to mix things socially. Quite a few young fools like Turner have lost their jobs or missed promotion with European companies because they thought they could suit themselves. Young Turner had to

resign from the clubs he'd joined, of course, double quick. I warned him it would happen but no, he knew better.' Monty heaved a sigh: his good-nature had been tried to the limit. 'Anyway, you've seen the set-up. Let's go and get something to eat.'

Matthew glanced at Joan. Her moment of animation had passed; now she was looking down her nose and plucking delicately at her chest, evidently rearranging whatever she wore under her frock. 'Isn't François supposed to be coming?' she wanted to know.

On their way back to the verandah they came across Dupigny, now clad in a billowing white suit, tying his tie by the light of a candle. He was a gaunt, dignified man in his fifties. He said in careful English: 'I shall follow you, Monty. I look forward with delicious alarm to discover what your cook has prepared for us.'

15

'My dear boy, it gives me great pleasure to welcome you at last to this house and, I should say, to these Straits Settlements which your father did so much to build up in his lifetime.' Monty and Joan had slipped off to change, leaving Matthew to introduce himself as best he could to the elder Blacketts whom he had with some difficulty located in a palatial drawing-room. He had often tried to picture Walter Blackett: he had supposed him to be someone very large and commanding. As it turned out, the man with whom he had just shaken hands was certainly commanding, but only his head was large: it loomed over a compact body and short legs and was covered in thick bristles of white hair which had collected here and there like drifts of unmelted snow on a stark mountainside; further white bristles supplied moustache and eyebrows: from beneath the latter, eyes of an alarming pale blue examined Matthew with interest. 'Come,' he said, 'and meet Sylvia.'

In her day Mrs Blackett had been considered beautiful, but all that now remained of her good looks were a pair of cornflower blue eyes, a shade or two darker than Walter's, set in a puffy, handsome, disappointed face. She still retained, however, some of the mannerisms of a woman accustomed to being admired for her appearance: a habit of throwing back her head to shake away the ringlets which had once tumbled charmingly over her smooth cheeks, or of opening her eyes very wide while you were talking to her, as if what you were saying was of enthralling interest. It made little difference whether you spoke about the emergence of a Swahili literature, about training schemes for electrical engineers, or about the best way to stuff a field-mouse. She would still gaze at you as if fascinated, her lovely eyes open very wide. Sometimes this automatic fascination could have a numbing effect on her interlocutor.

Looking at Mrs Blackett's disappointed, once-beautiful face, Matthew suddenly recognized that Joan was a beauty, though until this moment her appearance had not made much impression on him. It was as if, looking into her mother's faded features, he was confronted by a simplified version of Joan's and could say to himself: 'So that's the sort of face it's supposed to be!' It was a process not very different, he supposed, from thinking a girl was beautiful because she reminded you of a painting by Botticelli: if you had never seen the painting you would not have noticed her. But wait, what was it the Blacketts were saying?

For some moments the Blacketts, each ignoring the other's voice as only a married couple can, had been raining statements, questions and declarations of one kind or another on the already sufficiently bewildered Matthew. In the course of the next few minutes of incoherent conversation they touched on the war, his journey, rationing in Britain, his father's illness, his father's will (Walter took him by the arm and steered him away down the other end of the room, thinking this as good a time as any to remind Matthew of the responsibilities which would accompany his inheritance, but his wife uttered shrill complaints at being abandoned on her sofa and they were obliged to return), the Blitz, the approach of the monsoon, the rubber market and his journey again. Then Walter was summoned to the telephone.

While Walter was absent Mrs Blackett took hold of Matthew's wrist: she wanted to tell him something. 'I think you met my children, Monty and Joan, earlier this evening, didn't you? You know, I hardly think of them as my children at all. We are more like three friends. We discuss, oh, everything together as if we were equals.'

Matthew, who could think of no reply to this confidence, scratched his ear and gazed at Mrs Blackett sympathetically. But where was Kate? he wondered aloud. He had been looking forward to seeing her again. Was she away somewhere?

'Oh, she was here a moment ago,' said Mrs Blackett vaguely. There was silence for a few moments. Walter's voice, speaking emphatically, could be heard from the adjoining room. 'Yes, just three friends,' added Mrs Blackett despondently.

Presently she groped for Matthew's sleeve and with a tug, drew him to his feet. She wanted to introduce him to the people who had just come into the room. But these newcomers, on closer inspection, proved to be merely her children, or 'friends', Monty and Joan. She had evidently thought they might be someone more interesting for at the last moment she hung back, murmuring: 'Oh, I thought it might be Charlie.'

Monty and Joan, ignoring their mother, subsided into armchairs and ordered drinks from a Chinese servant who moved silently from one person to another. They both looked hot, though the air here was pleasantly cool. Joan had exchanged her white cotton frock for a dress of green silk with padded shoulders and leg-of-mutton sleeves. Now that she had removed her turban her sable ringlets tumbled charmingly over her cheeks.

Matthew, however, could not help staring at her legs; if he feasted his eyes on them so greedily it was not because they were unusually well shaped (though they were) but because she was wearing silk stockings which had become a luxury in England in the past year. Unfortunately, both Monty and Joan had noticed the direction of his gaze; he saw them exchange a sly glance.

'Kate!'

Kate had been hovering for some time in the next room anxiously awaiting the right moment to make a casual entry. She had been allowed to wear her best dress for besides Matthew an important RAF personage had been invited to supper. Now here she was, looking self-conscious. There was a moment of awkwardness, then she and Matthew shook hands. Kate blushed furiously and, stepping back, almost fell over a chair she had not noticed.

'You know *what?*'

'What?'

'If we were having steak for supper we could grill it on Kate's cheeks.'

'Mother, will you make him *stop*!'

'Really, Monty,' said Mrs Blackett wearily.

Snatching up a magazine Kate went to throw herself down on a sofa at the other end of the room. She did not open the magazine, however, but instead picked up a Siamese cat which had been curled up on the floor and began stroking and kissing it, ignoring the rest of the company.

'It's so nice to have a chance to talk,' said Mrs Blackett, 'before the others arrive.'

There was a murmur of assent but then silence fell again. Monty glanced at his watch; Joan yawned behind scarlet fingernails. Kate continued to stroke the cat at great speed, occasionally planting a kiss on the wincing animal.

Walter came back presently and took a seat beside Matthew, explaining that he had invited Brooke-Popham, the Commander-in-Chief, Far East, and a member of his staff to supper; earlier in the day he had attended a meeting with them about rice distribution. For the truth was, he went on, that in the event of hostilities in the Pacific, Malaya could find her food supplies in jeopardy, at least in the long run, because the greater part of the country's rice had to be imported. Ten years of effort (he himself had served on the Rice Cultivation Committee set up in 1930) still had not induced the native smallholders to grow rice instead of rubber. They were too idle. What could you do with such people?

'I suppose they think that rubber is more profitable,' suggested Matthew.

'I suppose they do,' agreed Walter.

'And they're right, aren't they?'

'Oh, I wouldn't say *that*, exactly.' Walter's tone was casual but he glanced sharply at Matthew as he spoke. 'There have been great variations in demand, of course, for rubber. Point is they can't eat it in bad times. Otherwise it would be the perfect crop for a country like this. Rice involves too much hard work. Anyway, there it is, we have to import it in vast quantities to feed the estate workers.'

'Perhaps the estates should grow rice …' murmured Matthew. 'It seems unfair to expect the smallholders to grow a less profitable crop simply to allow the estates to go on growing the more profitable crop …'

'Ah, but we haven't agreed that rice is less profitable.'

'In that case why do the estates …?'

'Drat!' exclaimed Mrs Blackett, hearing a distant bell. 'They're arriving already and just as we were beginning to have a nice talk.'

Walter had risen before Matthew had time to finish what he was saying. But even so, Mrs Blackett reached the door before he did. It opened to admit Dupigny in his billowing white suit. He and Mrs Blackett exchanged greetings. As she made to lead him deeper into the room she said: 'You, François, who always keep so well in touch, must tell us what you think.'

'Of what, Mrs Blackett?'

'Of the situation,' she replied vaguely.

'My dear Mrs Blackett, if you want my opinion the Japs will overrun us in a twinkling. First they exhaust us in the jungle. Then they seize us by the throat.'

'You terrify me, François, when you say such things. Except for Matthew you are the first to arrive so you must pay the penalty and come and sit down here with us for a few minutes … though I can see that what you have to tell us will scare us out of our wits.'

'My apologies,' murmured Dupigny with the exquisite tact of the diplomat and man of the world. He was evidently apologizing not for having cast Mrs Blackett into a state of alarm but for having arrived too early, for thus he had interpreted the words 'first to arrive'.

Mrs Blackett, leading the way across the room, said over her shoulder: 'How smart you look, François! I'm so glad to see you are managing in spite of your difficulties.'

In the meantime, Monty had slipped into the chair beside Matthew vacated by his father, and in a malicious whisper explained to him that Dupigny was penniless! a beggar! a total pauper! and that his mother, of course, knew very well that she was being pursued across the drawing-room not only by Dupigny but by his entire wardrobe as well, for the fellow was still clad in every single garment he had been wearing when he had slipped away from Saigon with General Catroux, give or take the odd pair of shorts or shoes he had been

able to borrow off Major Archer who luckily for Dupigny happened to be an old chum of his from the Great War.

While Matthew listened to all this and watched Dupigny stoop to brush Joan's knuckles with his smiling lips, he could not help wondering whether he would ever find anything in common with Monty. Dupigny looked up, still smiling, his attentions to Joan's knuckles complete.

'Well, François, what's the joke?'

'I smile because I remember that yesterday for the first time in my life I have been mistaken *pour un macchabée* … for a corpse.'

'For a corpse?' cried Joan, suddenly becoming vivacious again. She was evidently a willing victim of Dupigny's charm and polished manners. 'I don't believe you, François. What a terrible liar he is!' she grumbled to her mother.

'But precisely, for a corpse!' Dupigny struck an attitude. 'I am just leaving the bungalow when a Chinese gentleman approaches and says to me: "*Tuan*, are you dead?" I assure him that to the best of my knowledge I am still alive …' Dupigny paused to acknowledge the smiles of his audience.

' "But, *Tuan*," says our Chinese friend, "are you not then seriously wounded?" On the contrary I tell him that I am never feeling better in my life … "But then, *Tuan*," he says, almost in tears, "you must at least be 'walking wounded' otherwise you would not be here in this street!" '

'I know, it was an air-raid practice!' exclaimed Joan. 'I bet your Chinaman was wearing an ARP armband and a tin hat. But I thought that for corpses they always used Boy Scouts. Does this mean that they are now using grown men?'

'*Hélas!* Every day they grow more ambitious!'

New arrivals had been shown into the room in the meantime and Mrs Blackett set off once more towards the door, stumbling against a low foot-stool on the way, for the truth was that her lovely blue eyes were far-sighted and she should have worn glasses. Two officers had just entered. One of these newcomers was Air Chief-Marshal Sir Robert Brooke-Popham, a solidly built gentleman in his early sixties whose appearance suggested slightly baffled good nature. He had a square head, bald on top and with very thin hair plastered down at the sides above large, protruding ears. Beneath his white walrus moustache his open mouth lent him the air of wary incomprehension one sometimes sees in people who are not quite sure they have heard you correctly. Each of his powerful forearms cradled a shaggy bundle of documents which he was now trying to shuffle into a single bundle so that he might grasp the hand of Mrs Blackett. But in doing so a few sheets detached themselves and subsided in a series of gentle arcs to the floor. As he stooped to retrieve them, a few more slipped from his grasp and his air of bewilderment increased. At his side a tall, saturnine staff officer in the uniform of a Major-General watched without expression as the Commander-in-Chief scrabbled on the floor to assemble his papers. 'You'd better let me, sir,' he said taking the bundle and stowing it firmly under his arm. Then he put his swagger-stick down on a side table; an instant later he neatly scooped it up again as Mrs Blackett, turning, failed to notice the table and stumbled into it. She smiled her thanks to Brooke-Popham who had kindly steadied her with a hand to her arm. After a moment's hesitation the General put his stick down again.

Matthew's attention was now diverted by Monty's voice in his ear, whispering a further malicious commentary, this time on the Commander-in-Chief himself: it was common knowledge among those 'in the know' that despite his grandiose title Brooke-Popham had frightful difficulty finding anybody who was actually subject to his authority. Certainly not the Navy. And the Governor, too, if he wanted could go his own sweet way. And even General Percival and Air-Marshal Pulford who had replaced the dreaded Bond and Babington still took many of their orders from the War Office and Air Ministry respectively leaving poor old Brookers in his office at the Naval Base with nothing to do but stick flags in maps and, to make things worse …

But Matthew had to struggle to his feet to shake hands with the Commander-in-Chief. Brooke-Popham shook hands firmly with Matthew and gave him a somewhat rabbity smile. Then he moved on to greet Walter and his place was immediately taken by a dapper gentleman who was following in the Commander-in-Chief's wake: this was Dr Brownley, the Blacketts' family doctor. The Doctor was somewhat distraught this evening for, earlier in the day, after weeks, even months of inner struggle and deliberation, he had purchased an article he had seen in John Little's window in Raffles Place, an article he had longed and lusted for with the passion of a lover. But now that it had at last become his, somehow the expected consummation had not taken place. Since buying the wretched thing, which he could ill afford, he had scarcely given it a thought. The joyous fever to which he had been subject for months had suddenly left him. 'What's wrong with me?' he wondered, surreptitiously taking his own pulse. And now another distressing thought occurred to him: 'This makes eighteen times in a row that they've invited me here and I still haven't invited them back!' 'You must come to us one of these days', he muttered as he shook hands with Matthew, rolling his eyes in a rather odd and desperate way … (but fortunately the fellow didn't seem to hear).

'D'you really think the Japs will attack us?' Joan was asking Dupigny.

'Without a doubt,' replied Dupigny emphatically, and an expression of surprise and dismay passed fleetingly over Brooke-Popham's honest features as he overheard these words.

'My dear, François is in a most macabre mood this evening,' said Mrs Blackett to her daughter. 'I advise you

not to listen to him. He has already had me shaking like a jelly.'

'Ah, but it is not amusing, I assure you,' said Dupigny, seeing that his words had caused Joan to smile, for with Dupigny it was often hard to tell whether he was joking or not and he frequently said the most outrageous things with a perfectly straight face.

'But I understand, François, that the Japanese specialize in chopping the heads off Frenchmen. They raise a sword above their heads and go … chop! And Monsieur's head is rolling in the gutter. They say it is quite a sight. I think I shall take my knitting like Madame whatever her name was.'

'You think I am joking, Joan. Not at all! You forget that I know something of them, the Japanese. But what is the good?' he added, turning to Matthew as Joan went off laughing. 'You British are so serious. And when you think of France it is always in the manner of that *grand emmerdeur*, Charles Dickens. As for your self-confidence, that is something miraculous! Did you know,' he pursued, taking Matthew by the arm and leading him aside, 'that your Governor, Sir Thomas, went on holiday for eight months despite the outbreaking of war? That is an example of your phlegmatic British behaviour which fills a poor Frenchman like myself with awe, with admiration and, it must be admitted, with alarm!' He surveyed Matthew with an ironical smile.

'But never mind about that. Let me explain to you instead about this Air-Marshal. Sir Popham, for he is a most unusual sight. I refer not to his appearance, which is, I agree, awe-inspiring … but to his very presence here in this room. It is something quite unusual.' And Dupigny went on to explain to Matthew in an undertone (how fond everyone seemed to be of whispering assessments of each other's behaviour behind their backs!) that years of living in Singapore had, it was well known, instilled in Mrs Blackett a deep contempt for the Armed Forces. It had been, in peacetime, a most surprising sight to see her heaping abuse on the old and respected profession of arms, members of which she had for years resolutely refused to invite to her table. Why, even Major Archer, the least martial of men, given an introduction to the Blacketts while making his first tour of the Far East in 1937, had had to be warned to demobilize himself before calling. The poor fellow would otherwise have left a card on which, printed in spidery script for all to see, was his guilty secret: *Major Brendan de S. Archer.* And Dupigny laughed heartily at the thought.

The fact was, he went on, that Mrs Blackett, though charming in every way, was something of a snob and this very drawing-room was the meeting-place of one of the most exclusive circles on the island, scarcely even rivalled by Government House. For, as Mrs Blackett willingly used to admit, she had one advantage over the Governor. She was not obliged, as he was, to invite the rabble of dignitaries, military and civilian, whom the war was bringing to Singapore. She could invite whom she pleased. 'All those depressing generals!' she used to exclaim sometimes in the presence of her own more carefully selected guests. 'Poor Lady Thomas!'

And yet, not even the Blacketts, as it transpired, had been able to prevent the invasion of their circle by the War. Since the beginning of hostilities in Europe there had been progressive signs of weakening. He, Dupigny, had been there in person on one occasion when Mrs Blackett had asked Walter whether she should not relax this prohibition of military men from her dining-room 'in the interests of the War Effort'. An admiral or two, perhaps?

Walter had stroked his chin as he pondered his wife's difficult question, groping for the reply of a frank, straightforward sort of man. Well, no, he did not think so. After all, one's principles don't change simply because there's a war on. The problem, after all, was not that the odd admiral was short of food, but that he was tedious company. This had not changed. Very likely it had become worse. With a war raging in Europe the admiral would doubtless feel encouraged to discourse interminably on military and naval matters at the expense of … well, of the more important things in life.

And so Mrs Blackett had continued for some time to exclude the Forces (except for the Major, of course, who was in any case masquerading as a plain civilian and who had had no connection with the Army in twenty years). But then, little by little, as Hitler had advanced through Europe, the Allies had made corresponding advances into the Blacketts' exclusive circle … a colonel here, an air commodore there, in civilian clothes at first but, presently, in uniform. 'Until today we have the pleasure of seeing an Air-Marshal and a General sipping their *pahits* among us as if it were the most natural thing in the world!'

Matthew had listened with interest and amusement to this discourse. Dupigny was an entertaining companion and he would have liked to hear more about the Blacketts. But at this moment a distant gong sounded and supper was announced. Joan had disappeared for a few moments but returned just in time to catch her father's eye as they were going into the dining-room. Walter raised his eyebrows as if to enquire: 'Well, what do you think?' Joan did not have to be told what her father's raised eyebrows referred to. She had just slipped into the dining-room ahead of the guests to rearrange the name-cards by the various places, allotting herself a seat where she knew the light would fall to particular advantage on her long neck and delicate features, casting a special sheen on her sable curls when viewed from a certain other place. She smiled at her father and discreetly raised her thumb. Walter, in turn, did not have to be told that his daughter expected to make short work of the task she had set herself.

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On his way into the dining-room Matthew, attempting to demonstrate to the Doctor the width of a stream

where he had once caught a number of trout, struck Mrs Blackett a blow in the stomach that robbed her of her breath for a moment or two. A fuss then took place. Matthew fell back, disgraced, while the other guests crowded around to help her to a chair, offering her drinks of water and telling each other to move back and give her air. She sat there, gasping. Matthew watched her from a distance, discomfited and surprised: it had not seemed to him that he had struck her very hard. The impression left on his knuckles by the blow was already fading but he was pretty certain that it had never amounted to a good, solid punch, the sort that one might have expected would drop one's hostess to her knees. The unworthy thought occurred to him that Mrs Blackett might be putting it on a bit. But women were, after all, members of a gentler sex. It was distressing, whichever way one looked at it. He had been hoping to start off on a better footing with the Blacketts.

Meanwhile, Dr Brownley, at Mrs Blackett's side, kept saying: 'Highly interesting … Highly interesting' as if to himself; this caused Walter to look at him askance but actually the Doctor had been saying 'Highly interesting' to Matthew before the blow had been struck and was now merely repeating it. Sometimes a word or a phrase would get stuck in the Doctor's mind and rattle around in it for hours without any apparent reason. Occasionally, if by misfortune the phrase expressed some powerful image, it might stay in his mind for days or weeks. Once, for example, he had heard a dentist admonishing a patient who was inclined to neglect her teeth: 'Your nose will meet your chin!' For several weeks this phrase, alien, violent, rapacious, eating up all other thoughts, had whirled around his mind like a rat in a refrigerator. 'Your nose will meet your chin!' He had thought he would never get rid of it. In the end only the desire for an article he happened to see in Whiteaways had been sufficient to suffocate it. 'Highly interesting,' he murmured as Mrs Blackett, getting to her feet with a sigh, declared herself sufficiently recovered for the dinner to proceed.

This incident, fortunately trivial, did serve a useful purpose, however. It reminded Matthew that he must keep a stern watch over his comportment while at the dinner-table. It was not simply a question of table manners, though years of eating by himself with his eyes on a book beyond his plate rather than on the plate itself (how often had he been roused from his thoughts by something hot and slippery, a grilled fish, say, or a great bundle of spaghetti, dropping into his lap from an incorrectly angled fork!) certainly left room for improvement in that respect. No, it was more a tendency to grow over-excited in the course of what he knew should be an urbane discussion, to utter great shouts of derision at the opinions of his table companions, to gloat over them excessively when he found them guilty of faulty reasoning or some heretical assumption. Next day he would realize, of course, that he had behaved boorishly and would be filled with remorse, but next day it would be too late. Alas, more than once in Geneva he had found a door closed to him after he had allowed himself to get carried away. With the Blacketts he must watch his step!

Often had the Blacketts wondered precisely how Matthew had spent the years since he had left Oxford. Why had his infrequent letters been sent from hotels in remote corners of Europe? What was it, at a time of life when most young men decide to settle down in a home of their own, that had kept him flitting across frontiers like a lost soul? While these questions were being put to him Mrs Blackett, looking tired after her ordeal, glanced around the table to make sure that everything was in order; her gaze lingered for a moment on an unoccupied chair next to Joan and a shadow of concern passed over her features. Meanwhile, a bowl of soused fish was being proffered by the 'boys' to each guest in turn.

Oh, the answer to that was simple, Matthew explained, fishing in the dark tide of vinegar and peppercorns. He had been working for a charitable organization in Geneva called the Committee for International Understanding, vaguely connected with the League of Nations.

'My dear boy,' said Walter, 'I'd be surprised to learn that a single one of those charitable organizations ever did a damn thing that was any practical use to anybody. Geneva, if you ask me, is a city of hot air and hypocrites and that's all there is to say about it.' Walter hesitated, glancing at Dupigny who appeared to be rolling his eyes in horror at this opinion of Geneva, uncongenial, perhaps, to a former functionary of the Ministère des Colonies: but it might simply have been that Dupigny was flinching away from the fumes of vinegar rising from the bowl of soused fish which had now been offered to him in turn. He somewhat grimly captured a piece of fish on the serving spoon, inspected it for a moment, sniffed at it, then dropped it back into the dish, indicating to the 'boy' that he did not want any.

'These idealistic committees are a waste of time and as for the League itself …!'

Matthew chewed his fish calmly even though such a remark would normally have provoked him to vociferous argument: lucky that he had been reminded of his weaknesses a few moments earlier! Moreover, in a sense Walter was right. It was true that the Committee for International Understanding, which was merely one of hundreds of such idealistic barnacles clinging to the hull (already low in the water) of the great League itself, had not achieved any visible success in all the years he had worked for it. In the early days he had spent hour after hour writing letters to politicians urging them to good behaviour in the interests of the 'world community'. Invariably these letters had been answered in vague but polite terms by private secretaries who hinted that there were grounds for optimism. But as for any concrete improvement, well, that was another matter! All that one could say for sure was that 'out there' (Matthew had spent hours during his first winter in Geneva gazing out through the rain-rinsed window of his office in the direction of the lake), in the real world there was a sort of counter-Committee composed of private secretaries whose letter-writing labours exactly mirrored his own and, it had gradually dawned on him, were equally without significance.

And what a dismal place Geneva had been! The steadily falling rain through which one might occasionally,

if one were lucky, be permitted to see the brooding mass of the Grand Salève across the lake, the bitter wind from the Rhône valley churning the waves to a grey cream beneath the low blanket of cloud, the sensation of oppression which lay over the city during its never-ending months of winter, Geneva was no place for the experiment that was taking place there, the most daring, most idealistic, the grandest, most thrilling and sublime effort to introduce reason and equity into the affairs of nations. And gradually, so it had seemed to Matthew, the proceedings of the Assembly with its myriads of committees and sub-committees emitting a thick fog of quibbling resolutions and differing points of view, which thickly cloaked its good intentions just as mist clouded the Grand Salève, had come to resemble the Geneva weather. For month after month you could see nothing through the curtains of rain tumbling out of the sky but then abruptly, like a miracle the clouds would disappear, the sun would shine and Mont Blanc would appear white and glittering in the distance across the water. Yet how rare it was that the fog lifted from the Assembly's proceedings! On those rare days, the opening of the great Disarmament Conference in 1932 had been one of them, Matthew had believed himself to be present at one of the great turning-points in the history of mankind. He had been wrong as it had turned out and now he was sadder and certainly older, if not much wiser.

'Did someone mention Geneva?' asked Brooke-Popham who, at first busy with a large helping of fish, had now got the better of it and was free to enter the conversation. 'Met a young chap only the other day who'd been a couple of years there. Said it was a deuced awful hole. What was his name now? M'memory isn't what it was. American. Capital fellow. Very obliging. Let's see now. Colonel … no, Captain Erinmore. No. D'you know the chap I mean, Walter? Said he knew you and your charming daughter here. Herringport. No…Now let me see …'

'I don't believe I've had the pleasure, Sir Robert,' said Walter somewhat stiffly, exchanging a quick glance with Joan. The whole table, including Matthew, gazed at Brooke-Popham as if hypnotized.

'I know …' said Brooke-Popham. A tremor ran through his audience and Joan turned a little pale as she waited for the Commander-in-Chief to speak. There was silence, however, until it became clear that Brooke-Popham, worn out by his long day, had momentarily dozed off. However, his staff officer, the General whose name Matthew had failed to catch, now smoothly took control of the conversation in the place of his slumbering superior and launched into a lengthy reminiscence, not of Geneva but of Lake Maggiore where he had been on holiday in 1925 with his wife, who was a god-daughter of Chamberlain's wife. And this, by the most fortunate coincidence, for he had never been to Lake Maggiore before or since, had happened to be the historic October of Locarno! What an extraordinary scene he had witnessed! The peasants, their clothes white with dust, tramping in from the surrounding hills with vast hood-shaped baskets of grapes on their backs. And Chamberlain himself, a bizarre figure among these sons of toil. Ah, the General could see him still as if it were yesterday, his monocle glinting in the autumn sunshine as he lolled among the scarlet cushions of his red Rolls-Royce whose long silver horns like trumpets occasionally cleared their metal throats to scatter the rustics from its path: this machine, once the property of a maharajah, had been hired locally, it seemed.

'But…' began Matthew, becoming indignant despite his good intentions.

The General, however, had not yet reached the high point of his reminiscence, which amounted to nothing less than an invitation from the Chamberlains to join them for the excursion in celebration of Mrs Chamberlain's birthday so charmingly thought up by Briand and his friend, Loucheur: they had hired an Italian lake steamer, the *Fleur d'Oranger* for the occasion. On that delightful, extraordinary trip on the lake the General and his wife had mingled with all the chief delegates to the Conference, with Skrzynski and Benes, with the bearded, bespectacled, floppy-hatted Belgian, Vandervelde, with the shaven-headed, thick-necked German, Stresemann, his duelling-scarred cheeks set on fire by the sun and champagne … what a day to remember! In his mind's eye he could still see Loucheur with his round pop-eyed face and the curling black moustaches of a Victorian waiter, chuckling as the champagne flowed. And then, to cap it all, Mussolini, ostentatious as ever, had made a dramatic dash by racing car from Milan to Stresa and from there by speedboat to Locarno!

And then, the General's voice became solemn at the recollection, on the following day a great crowd of peasants had gathered in front of the town hall as the autumn twilight thickened. The word spread quickly through the crowd. The Treaty had been signed! Like a holy relic the document was carried to the window and shown to the crowd. A great cry had gone up. The church bells had been rung and women had wept and prayed. The Treaty had been signed!

'But just look at the result!' cried Matthew, his kindly face transfigured with emotion.

'Eh?' said the General, taken aback.

'Just look at the result! "By our signatures we affirm that we want peace," Briand declared and yet within fifteen years France and Germany were at war again and the rest of Europe with them. And the reason was this: Locarno was the *old way of doing things*! Behind-the-scenes diplomacy between the Big Powers. Whitehall and the Quai d'Orsay and the Wilhelmstrasse up to their old tricks again …'

'I know, his name was Herringdorf,' exclaimed Brooke-Popham waking up suddenly, but nobody paid any attention to him and presently he dozed off again.

'And so it goes on. So it has always gone on. If the League failed to prevent this war it was because Britain, France, Italy and Germany, while paying lip-service to the idea of an international assembly to settle differences between nations, were never prepared to submit to its authority. Nor give it the power it needed.

Who could take the League seriously when the real business was not being transacted in Geneva at all but aboard a pleasure steamer on Lake Maggiore! The Big Powers have brought this horrible destruction down on their own heads because their half-baked foreign ministries staffed by upperclass dimwits, who have more in common with each other than with the people of their respective countries, preferred to make cynical treaties rather than give real meaning to their membership of the League.'

'Steady the Buffs!' said Walter, not in the least concerned by Matthew's unfortunate harangue.

Matthew's face had grown flushed as he spoke. In his excitement he had wound a napkin round his clenched fist and delivered a terrible uppercut to the under surface of the table with the result that a miniature earthquake accompanied his final words, causing the glasses to dance on the table. Mrs Blackett, painfully surprised by this outburst for which she could see no sane explanation, glanced significantly at her husband to warn him against pursuing the argument. But Walter, calmly reaching out a hand to steady the tinkling cutlery beside his plate, said with a smile: 'Strong nations, Matthew, will always take advantage of the weak if they can do so with impunity. This is a law of nature. After all, as you must agree, the disapproval of the League did nothing to inhibit Japan from taking over Manchuria …'

'Well, exactly!' shouted Matthew. 'Because the League was given no support. Because Sir John Simon and the Foreign Office preferred to turn a blind eye to the crying injustice done to China and give tacit support to Japan!'

'Even without Britain's tacit support Japan would not have acted differently. Well, François, you're the expert at this sort of thing, what d'you think?'

'It is, I'm afraid, very simple. Powerful nations will have their way with the weak. They will see that their own interests are served. No doubt life would be better if both nations and people were guided by principle rather than by self-interest but … it is not the case. It is foolish to pretend otherwise.'

'Self-interest? But surely a government has a duty to act in the *moral* as well as the material interests of its people!' This last assertion, however, was received only with sympathetic smiles. The matter had already been settled to the general satisfaction.

Matthew was still in a state of dangerous excitement and these cynical views might well have caused him to deal the delicate rosewood dining-table another and perhaps even terminal blow but with an effort he managed to control himself. He was aware that in any case he had already made quite an exhibition of himself. Besides, he had heard this sort of thing so often before. He unwound the napkin from his fist and nudged his spectacles further up his nose, peering sadly round the table at his companions. Kate, who was bored, was over-heard asking her mother in a whisper what would be for pudding. Everyone chuckled and relaxed at this, even Matthew, though he was still distressed. He became aware that Joan was gazing at him from across the table and he could not help thinking how beautiful she was, the way the light caused her hair to glow and modelled with shadow the delicate contours of her cheekbones. He found it strange and disconcerting how this good-looking but impassive and perhaps even rather dull girl would suddenly brighten up and radiate a strong sexual attraction all around her, just as fireflies, mating at dusk in a warm climate, light up at intervals to signal their presence to a potential mate. No wonder, then, that according to Kate her elder sister was always breaking the hearts of the young men of the Colony: she evidently could not help it, any more than a firefly can stop itself lighting up at intervals.

'Your nose will meet your chin!' muttered the Doctor to Brooke-Popham at his side.

'What!' demanded Brooke-Popham waking up abruptly and staring at the Doctor in astonishment.

'Your father and I often used to discuss these matters,' said Walter who could not resist putting a few finishing touches to their argument, 'and I think we both felt that misplaced idealism had sapped the nation's strength badly in the last twenty years. The pacifism which has been vaunted since the end of the Great War by our friends of the socialist persuasion has resulted in the decline of British prestige and, even more serious, of her forces, too. Our enemies have been encouraged to try their luck.' Noticing that the Commander-in-Chief was awake again Walter added: 'What d'you think, Sir Robert? Am I talking through my hat?'

'Most certainly not, Walter,' said Brooke-Popham, using his napkin to dry his moustache where a few drops of vinegar still glimmered. 'You need only take the example of the year 1932. Is it a coincidence that the same year should see a mutiny of the British fleet and an aggression by the Japanese against the International Settlement in Shanghai? Most certainly not. One clearly suggested the other. Moreover, our socialist brethren were not without influence even at the War Office. Naval parities with Japan and the foolish doctrine of "No war for ten years" were the sad result of listening to their siren call.' The Commander-in-Chief beamed around the table to show that his views should not be taken amiss, even by those whom they happened to contradict. Nor did his friendly gaze omit the joint of roast beef which had just been brought in and set down for carving in front of Walter.

'All in all,' went on Brooke-Popham, 'it's perhaps just as well that the Japanese don't have a fighter to match our Brewster Buffalo, otherwise they might be tempted to try something on in this part of the world.' He hesitated. 'Not, of course, that we can afford to be over-confident,' he added, and his brow clouded somewhat; reports had been coming in of increased shipping at Camranh Bay for the past few days and even of landing-craft being loaded at Saigon. Well, he had not been nick-named 'Fighting Popham' for nothing. He sighed, thinking how difficult modern warfare was. Not like the old days! He was tired: ready to return to his quarters at the Sea View. Perhaps he would take a stroll on the hotel's lawn by the sandy beach (bristling,

though, nowadays with barbed wire and machine-gun nests), just to settle his mind before retiring. He wanted no landing-craft forging into his dreams and bursting there like ripe pods.

17

Now for some reason an air of melancholy settled over the table like a gentle fall of snow on an avenue of statues in the park, collecting in white drifts on heads and shoulders and blurring individual features. Matthew was contemplating Geneva again as he served himself with two delightfully lacquered roast potatoes, musing not without bitterness on the years he had spent travelling as the envoy of the Committee for International Understanding. For the truth was that those who governed the destiny of nations had remained as remote when he appeared in person as they had when he had written letters. Years, he remembered, had been spent roaming the corridors of palatial hotels (all the doings of the Committee had been attended by the most drastic luxury, as if the merest suggestion of economy would have blighted its high ideals) waiting to be summoned by some minor official of this or that Chancellery. On the rare occasions when he had found himself face to face with the statesman himself, it had always turned out to be because the statesman was in exile or disgrace, or because the Committee had been thought to be more important than it really was, or on account of some other such misunderstanding. In Japan, where he had gone in 1937 to recommend caution with respect to the 'China Incident' he had had an interview with a senior officer of the Japanese Army. This man had listened politely to what he had to say but had, himself, refrained from comment. Matthew had asked him whether he thought a war between Japan and America was probable. The officer had replied that he shared the view of the Emperor on that question. And what, Matthew had wanted to know, was the Emperor's view? Unfortunately, the officer had replied without blinking, the Emperor's view was something about which he was completely in the dark.

From about that time, perhaps, had dated Matthew's growing feeling of hopelessness concerning the Committee's task. After this visit to Japan he had taken to reading a good deal on his travels and though he still performed his duties conscientiously, of course, his spirit was no longer quite as deeply engaged as it had once been. It had become his habit to take books with him when visiting government offices: unimportant visitors were sometimes left to cool their heels in desolate ante-rooms for long periods. On more than one occasion he had become so engrossed in his reading that when finally informed that the dignitary in question would now receive him he had looked up in surprise, unable to think for a moment what the fellow might want of him.

Opposite Matthew, Brooke-Popham sat with his shoulders up to his ears, frozen in an attitude of weariness; he was remembering the old days. What fun it had been when they had first gone over to France in 1914! Not like today when every initiative was frustrated by some administrative detail. In those days the Flying Corps had only had to take care of reconnaissance: they had moved about the country like a travelling circus looking for a suitable field which they could use as an aerodrome wherever it was needed. In the course of the retreat from Mons it had been even more like a circus: he would set off in the morning in the Daimler in search of a suitable field and then the aeroplanes would follow and land on it later in the day, while the ground staff trailed across country after them with the fuel and the field work shops loaded into the most extraordinary collection of vans, solid-tyred lorries and pantechnicons, borrowed in London from different businesses … the van they had borrowed from Maples, the furniture people, had kept breaking down for some reason … As for the Daimler and the other motor-cars, they had been lent by various officers and civilians. One day, he remembered, he and Maurice Baring had set off in the Daimler on a misty autumn morning and about lunchtime had found a field on some table-land above a village called Sailly: and they had set to work then and there to carry stooks of corn to the side of the field so that the machines could land; and then on the way to Senlis he had bought a brass bell with a beautiful chime for the Mess. It had grown dark before they reached Senlis and a great yellow harvest moon had risen over the misty fields and the poplars. Baring had said it reminded him of a Corot. What a fine autumn that had been in 1914! A clear golden light lay over the reaped fields and the farms and the gardens full of fruit. He had only to close his eyes to see a little group of pilots at Saponay, lying in the straw and chatting after a reconnaissance sortie, or to see the heat-distorted air rising above the stubble at midday.

'A penny for your thoughts, sir,' said the General, hearing him utter a sigh.

'Oh, water under the bridge, Jack,' replied Brooke-Popham, clearing his throat dejectedly.

Matthew, accustomed to rationing, had found the roast beef extremely appetizing and was even wondering whether it was likely that he would be offered some more. At his side, however, Dupigny was eyeing his plate dubiously, prodding the meat here and there with his fork.

'It's roast beef,' said Mrs Blackett firmly.

'Nevertheless,' Dupigny said to Matthew in an undertone, 'it is sometimes possible to eat well here. Today, no, we are out of luck. But sometimes, when Walter invites his fellow merchants of Singapore the cook makes *un petit effort*. Then, ah! you would think you are in Italy of the Renaissance seated at a table surrounded by merchant-princes. You see, here in Singapore there are many people of this kind. The names of their commercial empires have the ring of glorious city-states, don't you think so? Sime Darby! Harrisons and

Crosfield! Maclaine Watson and Company! Langfield and Bowser! Guthrie and Company! And the greatest of them all, brooding over the Far East like the house of Medici over Tuscany: Jardine Matheson! Nor should we forget Blackett and Webb for there, in his usual place at the end of the table, a merchant-prince in his own right, Walter Blackett presides over this reunion of wealth and power as if he were Pope Leo X in person! That is a sight worth seeing!'

Dupigny's flight of fancy was interrupted by a sudden crash outside the door. Walter half rose to his feet but before he could make a move the door opened and a man lurched into the room backwards, as if he had just eluded the grasp of someone he had been struggling with in the corridor outside. For a moment he seemed to be expecting a further onslaught from his invisible assailant, but none came so he straightened himself and smoothed down his hair; the door was closed quietly from outside by an unseen hand. 'Sorry I'm late, Walter,' he said in rather slurred tones. 'Where am I sitting?'

'*Quelle horreur!*' whispered Dupigny, his eyes glinting with malicious pleasure. '*C'est Charlie, le frère de Madame Blackett. Et ivre mort, en plus!*'

Charlie was wearing merely a cream flannel shirt, open at the neck, and grey flannel trousers. On his feet he wore tennis shoes with the laces undone. His dishevelled appearance and the fact that he was panting slightly suggested that he had just come from some energetic sporting event. Matthew could see no family resemblance to Mrs Blackett in Charlie and he was clearly some twenty years younger. Like her, though, his face framed by blond curls bore the traces of youthful good looks. He was badly in need of a hair-cut.

Monty swiftly rounded the table and took him by the arm, steering him towards the empty place beside Joan. Charlie surveyed the table with watery blue eyes as he went, muttering half to himself: 'I'm glad to see you haven't polished off all the grub.'

'We've just been hearing, Charlie,' declared Mrs Blackett, 'that Matthew has recently come from Geneva where he has been working for the League of Nations.'

'Has he, indeed?' mumbled Charlie over the roast beef which had been hastily placed before him. 'And I'm sure a fat lot of good …' The rest of the sentence was muffled by his first bite of roast beef.

'Well, not *recently*,' said Matthew with a smile, and explained that the Committee for International Understanding, with Europe crumbling about it, had closed down in 1940, naturally dismayed by the amount of misunderstanding the outbreak of war entailed. 'As a matter of fact, for the past year I've been working on a farm. Because of my poor eyesight they didn't want me in the Army.'

'*Le* "Digging for Victory", *alors?*' suggested Dupigny. 'It is evident that the supply of food is no less important than the supply of munitions,' he added reassuringly.

Meanwhile Walter, swallowing the irritation caused him by the unorthodox arrival of his brother-in-law, had engaged Brooke-Popham in conversation, for the Commander-in-Chief had shaken off his melancholy and, though comatose, was still awake. For someone like himself, Walter was explaining, whose job it was to run a merchant business, a war with Japan was not a vague possibility for the future, it had already been in progress for some time. In this war, which was being fought invisibly and in silence by means of quotas, price-cutting and a stealthy invasion of traditional markets, Blackett and Webb had found itself not only in the front line but fighting for its life. Since the end of the Great War there had been a steady encirclement of British commerce in the Far East. By 1934 Japanese assaults on British textile markets had caused Westminister to introduce import quotas on cotton and rayon goods destined for Malaya. No wonder Walter and other Singapore merchants had protested to the Colonial Office that their mercantile interests were being sacrificed for no better reason than the inability of Lancashire to survive intensive competition from Japan. Walter paused and the faint grinding of his teeth became audible in the silence. He had reminded himself of the fact that Solomon Langfield, a big importer of Lancashire cotton, had been in favour of the quotas. That unprincipled blackguard! The bristles on his spine stirred beneath his Lancashire cotton shirt.

Walter surveyed his family and guests sullenly, as if somehow they had been responsible for this lamentable state of affairs. They gazed back, as if hypnotized. Only Monty, who had doubtless heard all this before, twiddled his fork and smothered a yawn.

'What I would like to know is this: can one really blame the Japanese?' enquired Walter. His guests exchanged puzzled glances, as if to say: 'Of course one can blame the Japanese. Why ever not?'

'After all, they too are fighting for their lives. They depended so heavily for their survival on silk and cotton that, naturally, they would do whatever they had to in order to sell them. In 1933 the average Japanese price for textiles was ten cents a yard while Lancashire's was eighteen or nineteen cents, almost twice the price! Mind you, the Japs got up to every trick in the book to evade the quotas. For example, since cotton piece-goods were not included in the quotas in no time pillow-cases big enough to put a house in began to arrive here in Singapore … pyjamas to fit elephants … shirts that twenty people could have got into … and all designed to be swiftly unstitched and used by our local manufacturers instead of the Lancashire cotton they were supposed to be using. Frankly, I admire their ingenuity. Can you blame them?'

'Business is all very well, Mr Blackett,' said the General rather brusquely. 'But you surely do not mean to condone the way they grabbed Manchuria and invaded China. Your own firm's business must have suffered as a result of the way the Japs have been closing the Open Door.'

Walter nodded and smiled. 'That's true. We have suffered. But look at it from the Japanese point of view. Can you blame them for extending their influence into Manchuria and China? After all, the demands they

have been making since 1915 … for the lease of Port Arthur and Dairen, for the South Manchuria and Antung-Mukden Railways and for the employment of Japanese capital in Manchuria and Eastern Inner Mongolia, what do they remind you of?' Walter, smiling now, gazed at his baffled guests. 'I can tell you what they remind *me* of! They are an excellent imitation of the sort of economic imperialism through demands for special privileges which Britain herself has been making in Asia since … well, since this young man's father started our business in the 1880s.'

'But was that a reason for Japan to invade China?' the General wanted to know.

Walter shook his head. 'As a businessman I understand very well why the Japanese had to invade China in 1937. China, from the point of view of trade and investment, was chaotic. No reasonably hard-boiled businessman looking at Nationalist China would have seen much to give him confidence. The Kuomintang wanted to put an end to foreigners' privileges. They wanted to see the foreign concession areas at Shanghai, Tientsin and so on handed back to China. They wanted to stop foreigners having their own courts and raising their own taxes in China. No, business must go on, whatever the price. And a businessman needs security. So can one blame the Japanese?'

'Security for business doesn't give people the right to invade and kill their neighbours!' protested Matthew.

'My dear chap, I couldn't agree with you more. But there comes a point where the justice of the matter becomes irrelevant. You must look at the situation from the Japanese point of view. For them it was a matter of life and death because while the Kuomintang was putting their investment in China at risk they were faced at home by the disastrous effects of the slump. In 1929, forty per cent of Japan's total export trade was in raw silk. It only needed the collapse of American prosperity and a consequent plunge in the demand for silk to bring the Japanese economy to catastrophe. Raw silk exports were halved almost overnight. Sales of cotton and manufactured goods joined the slide! What were they expected to do? Sit at home and starve? Let's not be naïve, my boy. Justice is always bound to come a poor second to necessity. Strong nations survive. Weak nations go to the wall, that has always been the way of the world and always will be! The point is, can one blame them for taking matters into their own hands? From the business point of view they were in a pickle. And now, mind you, with their assets frozen and their difficulties in getting raw materials their pickle is going from bad to worse. I believe the Americans should give them the raw materials they need. Otherwise what can they do but grab them by force?' Noticing that the Commander-in-Chief was looking taken aback by this suggestion, Walter added tactfully: 'Not that they'd get very far in this part of the world.'

'The reason the Japs are so touchy and arrogant is that they eat too much fish,' said Brooke-Popham. 'It's scientific. The iodine in their diet plays hell with their thyroids. They can't help themselves. So, no, I suppose one can't blame them.'

18

Now the last course had been placed on the table: a thoroughly satisfactory baked bread-pudding. Matthew, for his part, eyed it with concern, afraid that it might prove too unusual for the taste of Dupigny. He need not have worried, however, for Dupigny surprisingly proved to have a craving for it, ate two helpings liberally coated with bright yellow custard and even went so far as to ask for the ingredients. Mrs Blackett, mollified by his enthusiasm, gave them: stale bread, raisins, sugar, an egg, a little milk and a pinch of nutmeg.

'Incredible,' murmured Dupigny, eyebrows raised politely.

Brooke-Popham's thoughts had wandered back to August 1914 again, recalled to France by Dupigny's presence. He chuckled inwardly at the thought of how primitive all their arrangements had been that first summer. He had carried a small, brand-new portmanteau full of gold everywhere he went, paying for everything out of it, from new flying-machines to spares, to chickens and wine for the HQ Mess. The hours he had spent guarding that portmanteau! Once he and Baring had driven into Paris in the Daimler and gone to Blériot's factory there to buy a new flying-machine. Then, later, they had bought new tyres and headlights for the Daimler. He had paid for them in gold to the astonishment of the chap in the shop. 'The English are amazing!' he had said in French to Baring, who spoke the lingo. Yes, those were the days! Brooke-Popham folded his napkin, stifling a yawn, beckoned home now by the nodding palms of Katong and the Sea View Hotel. 'Life is good,' he reflected.

The great dish of pudding had been removed. The meal was over. A large white pill and a glass of water had been set in front of Charlie, who had been eating doggedly with his mouth very near his plate and making no effort to join in the conversation. Since he had finished eating, however, he had been practising backhands with an invisible tennis racket over the tablecloth. In the process his wrist caught and knocked over a glass of water. There was a moment of startled silence.

'I leave you to deal with him,' Walter said to his wife with unexpected anger, rising from his chair.

'Oh, really, Uncle Charlie, what have you done now?' Kate said, putting a comforting hand on his shoulder. 'And you haven't taken your pill.' The guests filed out in silence, leaving Charlie staring sulkily at the saturated table-cloth.

Matthew would have liked to retire to bed at this point: he had had a long and tiring day. But it seemed that the Blacketts had not yet finished with him for Monty suggested a quick stroll in the garden. Together

they stepped out into the warm, perfumed night accompanied by a dull-eyed Joan, yawning again behind scarlet fingernails. Birds uttered low cries, insects clicked and whirred around them and once a great patch of black velvet swooped, slipped and folded against the starry sky. Some sort of fruit bat, said Joan.

Although flanked by the young Blacketts, Matthew found himself peering uneasily into the vibrating darkness: he was not yet accustomed to the tropical night. As they sauntered through the potentially hungry shadows in the direction of the Orchid Garden he tried to recall whether he had once read something about 'flying snakes' or whether it was simply his imagination. And did fruit bats only eat fruit or did they sometimes enjoy a meal of flesh and blood? He was so absorbed in this speculation that when, presently, he felt something slip into his hand he jumped, thinking it might be a 'flying snake'. But it was only Joan's soft fingers. To cover his embarrassment he asked her about fruit bats. Oh, they were perfectly harmless, she replied, despite their frightening, Dracula-like wings.

But, Monty was saying with a laugh, what did Matthew think about another weird creature, namely their Uncle Charlie? Did Matthew know that he had been a cricket Blue at Cambridge? For he had been, though one might not think so to look at him now.

'Does he work for Blackett and Webb?'

Monty and Joan hooted with laughter at this idea. 'Father wouldn't let him within a mile of the place. No, he's in the Indian Army, the Punjabis. That was OK while they were stuck on the Khyber Pass or wherever they normally spend their time. But then, disaster! Charlie's regiment gets posted to Malaya. Father can't abide him, as you may have gathered. He has to put up with him, though, because of Mother who insists on inviting him to stay whenever he has any leave. She's afraid he will go off the rails if she doesn't watch over him. She may be right at that. Once he spent a week in Penang and we kept getting telephone calls asking us if we were prepared to vouch for a Captain Charles Tyrrell who was running up bills right left and centre. Then he started tampering with someone else's wife and there was the most frightful palaver over that. Father had to go up and straighten it all out. You can imagine how delighted he was. Because, of course, we're well known in this country and gossip spreads like wildfire.'

'Oh, and he's a poet, too,' said Joan, giving Matthew's perspiring hand a little squeeze.

'That's right. He wrote a poem about a place in Spain …'

'Guernica.'

'Yes, that's it, about the place Joan just said. Mother had to warn us all not to laugh because he took it so seriously. He's quite a card.'

Matthew had only been able to give part of his attention to what he was being told about Charlie because of the sensations that were spreading up through his body from the hand which Joan was holding. Not content with the damp, inert clasp of two palms, Joan's fingers had become active, alternately squeezing his own and trying to burrow into the hollow of his palm. He could not help thinking: 'If Monty weren't here …' and his heart pounded at the thought of what he and Joan might get up to. But Monty *was* there; and he showed no sign of noticing the delicious hand-squeezings that were going on in the darkness. Presently he said: 'We'd better be going inside. They'll be leaving soon.' With a final squeeze Joan's hand abandoned Matthew's as they passed back into the light.

They found the elder Blacketts and their guests drinking coffee and brandy in the drawing-room. Relations between Walter and the unfortunate Charlie had evidently been somewhat restored while they had been in the garden for, as they entered, they heard the tail-end of an argument that had been taking place.

'You expect young men being paid next to nothing to die defending your property and your commercial interests!' Charlie was asserting vociferously. He was still a little drunk but had tied his shoe-laces in the interim and his appearance was less dishevelled.

'I don't know about dying,' replied Walter good-humouredly. 'All you've done so far is drink.' And that proved to be the end of the discussion and of the evening, for the Air-Marshal and the General announced that it was time that they were on their way. They politely insisted on shaking hands with everybody on their way out, even with little Kate who, overcome by the momentous occasion, got mixed up and said: 'Thank you for having me.' This caused smiles all round and poor Kate wished she were dead. How could she be so childish! She blushed furiously and tried to smile, too, though she really felt like bursting into tears.

'You must come to our place one of these days,' muttered Dr Brownley to a semi-circle of glassy-eyed Blacketts who seemed to have gathered for no other purpose than to stare after him in mute accusation as he escaped into the darkness.

Dupigny suggested to Matthew that they walk back to the Mayfair by way of the road rather than the garden, to see if the Major had retired to his little bungalow on the opposite side of the road. Matthew said goodnight to the elder Blacketts. On the way out he found Monty and Joan on the steps by the front door. Monty held out his hand, saying that he was off to bed and would wish Matthew good night.

'Monty, I'd like to thank you for your help in getting me out here.'

'Think nothing of it, old boy. After all, we couldn't leave you to be raped by all those strapping Land Girls, could we?' And with a wave Monty disappeared inside.

After a moment Joan came forward. He thought she was going to say good night, too, but no. 'Hello you!' she said, lighting up like a firefly in the darkness. He peered at her uncertainly. 'You always look so serious,' she added, putting her shoulder against his and shoving him a little off balance.

‘Do I?’ he asked cautiously.

‘Come on, I’ll walk down the road a bit with you and François.’

They set off together down the drive but almost immediately Joan was called back by her mother who was standing at the front door. She wanted to know where Joan was going.

‘Oh Mother!’ Joan said irritably.

‘Why can’t you leave the girl alone?’ Walter wanted to know, equally exasperated. A hurried conference took place.

While they were waiting for her Dupigny asked: ‘D’you like women?’

‘Well, yes, of course.’ To Matthew this seemed a rather peculiar question. After a moment he added: ‘I’m rather keen on D. H. Lawrence, as a matter of fact.’

There was a pause while Dupigny turned this over in his mind. Presently he said: ‘Out here, you know, there are many young men but few young women … I mean, European. There are, *bien entendu*, the Asiatical women, ah yes, but in Singapore, you see, although the young men make terribly love in a physical way to the oriental ladies and sometimes even to the mature European ladies (those who have, as we say, *la cuisse hospitalière*), still, alas, they are not satisfied. They sigh for companions of their own age and race. They are encouraged, moreover, by their elders who wish to preserve the purity of the race, a desire of which Hitler himself would not disapprove. With us in Indo-China it is different. We do not worry like the British when one of us decides to marry the daughter of a prosperous native. Such marriages have very often a great utility, both commercial and political.’

‘Well, I must say …’ began Matthew, but his tired brain declined to furnish him with any suitable observation.

‘You like Joan, perhaps? Yes, she is a nice English girl, healthy, full of virtues, plainly but solidly built in the English manner, made (*comme le bread-pudding de Madame sa mère*) entirely of good things, but, alas, without either the ravishing innocence of a child or the serious attractions of a mature woman. Personally I believe the only one of the Blackett ladies to my taste is *la petite* … Miss Kate, and even she is becoming a trifle *trop mûre* … She is already in my opinion a bit too … how d’you say … *bien balancée* … *bien foutue* … Yes a bit too well-endowed, thank you.’

‘But she’s only a child!’

‘I agree she has that in her favour. All the same, the rot begins. I speak physically, of course.’ Dupigny suppressed a yawn.

‘Of course,’ agreed Matthew hastily, feeling the tide of the conversation carrying him swiftly out of his depth. ‘But what I meant was …’

‘Ah, Joan is returning at last.’

The night air seemed very humid: the breeze had dropped, increasing the impression of heat. An hour ago there had been a brief, heavy downpour and water still gurgled busily in the deep storm-drain beside the road, but overhead the sky was clear. Matthew and Dupigny sauntered along hands in pockets; Joan walked between them, humming a song beneath her breath. As the road curved towards the Mayfair, however, she dragged the two men to a stop and disengaged herself. She had promised her mother she would not stay out long. Matthew shook hands with her stiffly: he thought it best not to attempt a more intimate embrace for the moment. As for Dupigny, he collected her slender fingers in his own and conveyed them to his lips but, despite the darkness, Matthew could see that he was using them to mask the remains of the yawn against which he had been struggling while speculating on the sensual qualities of the Blackett women.

‘How romantic you are, François! Why can’t Englishmen be like you? Well, good night!’

Matthew and Dupigny walked on towards the Major’s bungalow which seemed, as far as Matthew could tell in the darkness, to be no less ramshackle than the Mayfair Building on the other side of the road. They called at the verandah but there was no reply, except the soft cry of a night-bird from somewhere in the undergrowth. Matthew produced his packet of Craven A and they each lit a cigarette, lingering in the road while they smoked: indoors the heat would be suffocating.

‘D’you happen to know what the Singapore Grip is?’ Matthew asked. ‘Some people I met said I should watch out for it.’

‘I believe it is what they call here a certain tropical fever, very grave. Certainly, you must watch out for it.’

‘Oh?’ But why, wondered Matthew, would the RAF men have found it so amusing if it was a serious illness? This was a mystery.

Matthew would have pursued the matter but Dupigny was asking him how well he knew his old friend Major Archer. ‘What? You have been introduced only? You must make his acquaintance better …’ And he went on to explain how fond he was of the Major. The Major, indeed, was one of the few people on earth for whom he, Dupigny, had any affection at all. They had first met in France during the Great War. In those days he had been a liaison officer with a British regiment. He and the Major had hardly known each other then. After the war he himself had gone to Indo-China, the Major had gone to Ireland. But then, one day in 1925, on a visit to London to see his tailor during his European leave, they had bumped into each other at a restaurant in the Strand, chez Simpson, perhaps? With enormous difficulty they had succeeded in recognizing each other, they had exchanged cards, they had renewed their acquaintanceship. Then, in the course of his next visit to Europe in 1930, they had met yet again, this time on purpose, and in 1935 yet again.

Dupigny had watched his English friend with the utmost curiosity. It had taken the Major time to settle down after the war. For a while he had been in hospital. And then he had evidently witnessed some unpleasantness in Ireland which had affected his peace of mind. The terrible unemployment of the post-war years had further unsettled him. In those days, too, he had perhaps still been yearning to capture a suitable young lady as a bride. There had no doubt been some woman in Ireland … but that Dupigny suspected only. For the Major himself never spoke of such matters.

Over the years Dupigny had noticed the Major becoming more private in his habits and, in some ways, undoubtedly a bit eccentric. If you had gone to take coffee with the Major in, let us say, 1930, you would have witnessed a strange ritual. The housekeeper would first appear with a silver jug containing just-boiled water. The Major, still chatting to you politely, would whip a thermometer from his breast pocket, plunge it into the water, remove it, read it, dry it on a napkin and, with a nod to the housekeeper, replace it in his pocket. The coffee could now be made! Ah, that was the bachelor life for you! And there were other things, too. He had taken to grumbling if his wine glasses did not sparkle as clear as rain-water … yet at the same time thought nothing of piling his cigar ash on the polished surface of his mahogany dining-table, or of dropping it, without ceremony, on the carpet.

You might also, if the Major had ushered you into his drawing-room in Bayswater about the year 1930, have found it hard to discover a satisfactory seat, since all the more comfortable chairs and the sofa were occupied by slumbering dogs, refugees for the most part from Ireland's fight for independence and by now growing old. If you did find a seat it would be covered in fine dog hairs: these animals were always moulting for some reason. The Major himself would merely perch on the arm of a chair while the dogs gazed at him with bleary devotion from their cushions. Sometimes, if a bark was heard in the street outside, they would give answering barks, though without moving an inch from their chairs. Dupigny had known few more strange experiences than that of sitting in the company of the silent, withdrawn Major towards the end of a winter afternoon and hearing those dogs erupting round him in the gloom.

'*Eh bien!* So all is up with the Major!' one might have thought in 1930, looking at him perched on the arm of a chair across his penumbrous, dog-strewn drawing-room. 'Nothing surely can save him now from the increasingly private comforts and exacting rules of his bachelor life.' One by one over the next five years while he, Dupigny, was again in Indo-China the dogs had dropped away and were not replaced. The Major, perhaps, was no longer very fond of dogs and had kept them mainly from a sense of duty, just as he had kept the drawing-room itself exactly as it used to be when his aunt was still alive. By this time, without a doubt, he had become a confirmed bachelor. The marriages of his contemporaries no longer filled him with such envy. He had begun to see that being married can have drawbacks, that being single can have advantages.

Not, of course, that the Major had not continued to fall in love at regular intervals. But now he tended to fall in love with happily married women, the wives of his friends and thus, for a man of honour like himself, unattainable creatures who personified all the virtues, above all, the virtue of not being in a position to return his feelings. The love he bore them was of the chivalrous, selfless kind so fashionable among the British in late-Victorian and Edwardian times, perhaps because (*selon l'hypothèse Dupigny*) it handily acknowledged the female principle in the universe without incommoding busy males with real women. Still, Dupigny had had to admit that his poor friend had a life which suited him very well, *y compris les amours*.

Agreed, the Major's reward in these encounters was not the tumultuous one of illicit embraces between the sheets: it was the glance of gratitude on a pure maternal brow, the running of a moustache as soft as … *blaireau*, how d'you say? (badger? thank you) … the running of a badger-soft moustache over fair knuckles, the reading of unspoken thoughts in bright eyes. These small moments, remembered late at night as he sprawled in his lonely bed smoking his pipe in a bedroom that smelled like a railway carriage (*Fumeurs*), were the Major's only but adequate reward.

If, however, perhaps hoping for a deeper relationship, the lady should pay him a visit one afternoon bringing her children (Dupigny had witnessed one such occasion) the Major would become cross. Young children would totter about the house knocking things over and trying to hug the elderly, malodorous dogs, themselves grown short-tempered with age. Older children would chase each other from room to room and would keep asking him if they could play with certain important possessions of his (a gramophone, a pair of Prussian binoculars, a steam-powered model boat or electric railway) without realizing that these objects could only be handled with elaborate ceremony and precautions. These children-accompanied sentimental visits, Dupigny surmised, had never failed to be disastrous, passion-damping.

On such occasions, no doubt, faced with a terrifying glimpse of what a real marriage might entail, the Major could not help congratulating himself on his escape. A white marble statue of Venus, it was true, still glimmered, seductively unclothed, at the foot of his stairs. But having turned forty the Major must have reflected that by now he was over the worst. He had come through the years of emotional typhoons battered, certainly, but all in one piece. It was wonderful how a human being could adapt to his circumstances. The Major knew in his heart that he could not have endured marriage, the untidiness and confusion of it.

And so, there the Major had been, about 1935, fixed in his habits, apparently suspended in his celibacy like a chicken in aspic. But one day, abruptly, he was no longer satisfied: he had decided to give it all up, this comfortable life, to travel and see the world before he was finally too old. A man has only one life! How surprised Dupigny had been when one day he learned that the Major was making a voyage to Australia, and

then to Japan, even to visit him in Hanoi and later in Saigon! Why had he done this? Another love affair that had gone wrong? The Major never spoke of such things. Why had he then settled in Singapore, opportunely for himself as it now turned out? This was something which Dupigny had not understood. And neither, perhaps, had the Major!

Matthew and Dupigny, having finished their cigarettes, approached the entrance to the Mayfair Building: a little way into the compound a stiff, dignified old *jaga* in khaki shorts and a yellow turban watched them sleepily from his *charpoy* but all they could see of his face in the darkness was a copious white moustache and a white beard. Dupigny asked whether the Major was still in the bungalow. The *jaga* raised a skinny arm to point towards the building behind him.

'It seems the Major has been here all the time. Let us go and wish him good night.'

After the starlit compound the darkness on the verandah seemed almost complete. It was agreeably perfumed, however, by the smoke of a Havana cigar whose glowing tip Matthew had no difficulty in locating as it danced for a moment in fingers raised in greeting.

'Not yet in bed, Brendan? Old gentlemen must take care of themselves.'

'I'll be going to bed in a moment,' the Major said, but Matthew had already been informed that the Major, harassed by insomnia, was just as likely to sit here on the verandah smoking cigars until first light. 'Did you hear anything? Were there any military big-wigs there?'

'Brooke-Popham and a General. They appear confident.'

Matthew and Dupigny groped their way across the verandah to the Major's side. There Matthew collapsed with a shriek of bamboo on to a chaise-longue. How tired he was! What a lot had happened since he had last been in bed! 'Very soon now I shall go to bed,' he thought wearily. From where he sat he had a view of the Major's silhouette. He could see the outline of his 'badger-soft' moustache, recently outraged by Cheong's scissors. He could even see the corrugated wrinkles mounting the slope of the Major's worried brow, growing smoother as they reached the imperceptible line of hair neatly plastered down with water.

'What fools those men are!' exclaimed the Major, and the tip of his cigar glowed fiercely in the darkness. But after a moment he added humbly: 'Of course, they may know things that we don't.'

19

At the end of the first week of December a little group of men wearing overalls or boiler-suits or simply shorts on account of the heat gathered one afternoon in the shade of the tamarind tree in the Mayfair's compound. They belonged to the Mayfair Auxiliary Fire Service unit (AFS for short) and they had been summoned, although today was Sunday, to an urgent practice. The morning newspaper had carried news of a convoy of unidentified transport ships heading south from Japanese-occupied Indo-China and the Major, who was in charge of the Mayfair AFS unit, feared the worst. The Major, at the moment, was not under the tamarind tree but in the garage beside the house, struggling with a tarpaulin. Matthew, who had just been enrolled in the unit, was assisting him. There was no ventilation in the garage and the day's sun, beating down on the corrugated iron roof, had made it like an oven inside. Matthew had already been suffering from the heat: now he felt the perspiration running down his legs and collecting in his socks.

The Major had dragged the tarpaulin off a large box-shaped object which proved to be some sort of engine, gleaming with steel and brass pipes and fittings. Matthew stared at it blankly. It had two large dials on a sort of dashboard and, instead of wheels, two carrying-poles like a palanquin.

'It's a Coventry Victor,' declared the Major with pride. 'Brand new!'

'But what does it do?'

'It's a trailer-pump. The trailer is over there. I've had a bracket put on the back of my car so we can tow it about if need be. Give me a hand and we'll carry it outside. We're going to have a drill with it when our instructor gets here. He's an ex-London Fire Brigade man and when he's sober he knows his stuff … which isn't always, unfortunately.'

Presently, the instructor arrived. He turned out to be a short, bald and red-faced man in his fifties called McMahon. After a lengthy altercation with the taxi-driver who had brought him he advanced swaying towards the Mayfair Building. The Major had explained to Matthew that Mr McMahon, like many firemen, had started life as a seaman. It became clear, however, as he collided with a bush, shouting, on his way round the house, that this was not the explanation of his rolling gait.

The Major had drawn up the members of the Mayfair AFS unit in a line beside the tennis court ready to be inspected by their instructor. They stood at ease, waiting uncertainly, while Mr McMahon weaved his way towards them, cursing. Apart from the Major himself, the unit consisted of Dupigny, a Mr Sen and a Mr Harris, both clerks who were occasionally lent to the Mayfair by Blackett and Webb (the former was Indian, the latter Eurasian), Mr Wu, a friendly Chinese businessman, the Chinese 'boy', Cheong, who had surprised the Major by volunteering and who, though his face remained perfectly impassive in every situation, had proved easily the most efficient of the recruits, Monty Blackett, who had volunteered (the lesser of two evils) to avoid conscription into the Local Defence Force but was still hoping to achieve, if not a complete dispensation, at least, a more agreeable position in Singapore's active or passive defences, and finally, a handsome young man

called Nigel Langfield, the son of Walter's arch-rival and enemy, Solomon Langfield: Nigel was wearing a very new blue boiler-suit with AFS prettily embroidered in red on one of its breast pockets; from time to time he would lower his nose to sniff the satisfying newcloth smell of this garment.

These would-be firemen eyed their instructor with concern as he waded towards them, as if through a swamp. Before reaching them, however, he unexpectedly changed course to embrace the trunk of another tree not far away. Then, with his arms still round the tree and still cursing, he slithered to the ground, eventually struggling around to use it as a back-rest.

'God help ye, y' blithering lot o' helpless bastards!' he babbled, fighting for breath. 'Let's see another dry drill then, you perfumed bunch o' pansies or, God help ye, the fists'll be flyin' or me name's not McMahon! Get on with it … A dry drill, I'm tellin' ye!'

'I thought we were going to do a wet drill today,' said the Major, looking dissatisfied. 'That's what you said last time.'

'*This* time I'm sayin' it's a dry drill, y'bastard, so hop to it and see that ye run the bleedin' hose out without a twist in it or ye'll catch it hot, I'm tellin' ye …'

'Well, we might just do *one*,' said the Major, 'in order to get the feel of it before we do a wet drill. I'm afraid McMahon's not going to be much help to us today by the look of it,' he added in an undertone to the rest of the unit.

'I heard that, y' pissin' old goat,' yelled McMahon, quivering with a fresh paroxysm of rage and struggling ineffectually to get to his feet, evidently with the intention of exacting retribution.

'Shut up or we'll bash your silly brains in,' said Monty languidly, sloping off in the direction of the bungalow.

'Look here, Monty, where are *you* off to? We're just going to begin,' said the Major indignantly.

'I'm just going to find an aspirin, old boy, if you don't mind.'

'Well, hurry up about it. I'll try and explain the basic drill to Matthew in the meantime.'

There were, the Major explained, two types of hose: suction hose for picking up water from an open source such as a canal or a river, and delivery hose, for relaying water to the fire. Suction hose had a wide diameter and was reinforced to keep it cylindrical; it also had wire strainers to prevent stones or rubbish being sucked up into the pump. 'Have you got that?'

'I think so. This other one, then, is the delivery hosepipe, is it?'

From under his tree McMahon shrieked with laughter. '*Hosepipe!* He thinks he's a bleedin' gardener!'

'Hm, I should have mentioned that, we say "hose" rather than "hosepipe", and ropes are known as "lines" and the rungs of a ladder are called "rounds" … I don't suppose it matters particularly, as we're just a scratch team, but McMahon seems to prefer it.'

Delivery hose, the Major continued, was wound flat on a revolving drum and came in fifty or a hundred-foot lengths with a diameter of two or three inches; at the business end there was a tapering brass tube called the 'branch', not the nozzle! The drill was that the number one man ran off in the direction of the fire with the branch, unreeling a length of hose as he went; meanwhile the number three man laid out another length of hose and dealt with the couplings. These couplings were what were known as 'male' and 'female', that was to say …

'That fat pansy wouldn't know the difference if ye took up y'skirts and showed him!'

'That will do, McMahon,' said the Major sharply. He turned back to Matthew. 'The idea is that the male coupling plugs into the female on the previous length of hose. The male plugs into the standpipe, if that's where the water is coming from, or into the engine pump. Meanwhile the runner takes hold of the lugs on the "female" end around which the delivery hose is normally wrapped and he uses them as an axle round which the roll of hose unwinds. Here, Nigel will give us a demonstration.'

Nigel obediently took the roll of hose and holding it a little way from his body went loping gracefully away with it, laying it down neatly on the turf behind him as he went.

'It's not as easy as it looks. Nigel's rather good at it.'

It was true. Everybody watched in admiration and even McMahon was temporarily silenced by this display of skill. There was still no sign of Monty so Cheong was sent to look for him. Meanwhile Mr Wu, who with Dupigny and Cheong had been tinkering with the engine, was called forward to show Matthew how to climb a ladder which had earlier been set up against the roof of the Mayfair.

'When climbing radder glasp lounds not side of radder,' explained Mr Wu to Matthew.

'What?'

'Glasp lungs!'

'Good heavens! You mean, your own? Or someone else's?'

'That's right,' said the Major, approaching swiftly. 'You should always hold the rungs, or the "rounds" as we call them, rather than the frame of the ladder. And incidentally never step on to a window-ledge: they tend to collapse. The drill is to put one leg right into the window. Ah, thank heaven for that, it looks as if McMahon has gone to sleep,' he added. 'Perhaps this would be a good time to get the pump working. After all, we may not have much more time to practise.'

A gloomy silence had fallen on the Mayfair AFS unit. Even McMahon, muttering in his sleep, looked discouraged. Staring into the distance where the white wedding-cake mass of the Blacketts' house glimmered

above the trees, the Major said: 'Still, with luck we may never be needed.'

As soon as the afternoon's drill was over Matthew with a sigh of relief made for the bathroom, which as he had already discovered, had one serious disadvantage: the absence of any running water. A vast green and yellow earthenware jar with a copper ladle stood in one corner. This was a Shanghai jar. The procedure was simple: you dipped the ladle into the jar and poured the water over yourself. Matthew stripped and began sluicing himself; he found the water in the jar tepid but refreshing, nevertheless.

'An Irishwoman will be fired from a cannon, Monty? Whatever for?'

Monty, who had followed Matthew into the bathroom with an invitation, explained. It was some special show being put on at The Great World in order to raise money for the war against the Jabs in China. The Irishwoman was a human cannonball making a tour of the Far East. And there was also a group of singers called the Da Sousa Sisters. Anyway, Joan had said she was keen to go. That meant they only needed another woman and they could make an evening of it. 'You don't happen to know any women, do you?'

'Monty, I've only just arrived.'

'Never mind then. I expect I'll be able to scrape one up somewhere. I'll see you over at our place in a couple of hours, OK?'

'Oh look, while you're here, Monty, I'd like you to explain something about our Johore estate that I don't understand. Why are we replanting at a time when it's so urgent to produce rubber? I don't get it.' The previous day Matthew and the Major had driven over the Causeway and into Johore on the mainland so that Matthew could inspect the Mayfair estate. They had discovered that in a number of places mature trees were being replaced with saplings. When they had questioned Turner, the estate manager whom Matthew had glimpsed on his first evening in Singapore, he had not known the reason for it. He had simply been instructed to replant by Blackett and Webb who, as managing agents, were in control of planting policy.

'Well,' replied Monty, sighing heavily, 'it's nothing to worry about. It's all under control.'

'I'm sure it's under control. I just want to get the hang of things, that's all.'

'Rubber trees don't last for ever, you know. And as they get older they get brittle. They break in the wind …'

'But they last for thirty years or so, don't they? And the trees that are being replaced aren't that old. Besides, it's not just an odd tree here and there. It's being done in sections.' There was no sound in the bathroom except for a steady splash of water and Monty's rather laboured breathing. Matthew began to ladle water over himself again.

'Look here,' said Monty finally in a rallying tone, 'I have to admit that your question has stumped me. We have so many estates that it's hard to know everything about each one. The Mayfair is small beer compared with some of the others. But I tell you what. I'll get the facts straight before your next Board meeting and we'll thrash it out there, OK? Now don't worry about a thing. I'll be on my way now …' However, he continued to stand in the doorway watching the water coursing over Matthew's plump body. Did Matthew know, he enquired with a leer, that in the East there were many stories of beautiful girls who, in order to be cool, climbed into Shanghai jars and then could not get out, so they had to call a manservant to break the jar? Matthew could probably imagine what happened next! With that Monty departed, licking his lips, to bathe in the greater comfort of his parents' house.

Later, refreshed by his bath and wearing a light linen suit, Matthew was on the point of leaving for the Blacketts' house when the telephone rang. It was Ehrendorf. In the few days which Matthew had now spent in Singapore the two friends had so far managed only one brief meeting. The reason, undoubtedly, was that Ehrendorf was extremely busy. With the rapid decay of the political situation in the Far East his services, Matthew surmised, must be in constant demand for the assessment of British military strength and strategy. However, Matthew was aware of a new feeling of constraint in his friendship with Ehrendorf. How different it was now from the way it had been before! He could not help contrasting that strained meeting at the aerodrome and the subsequent drive into Singapore with their previous meetings in Europe. Matthew, though by nature unobservant, was well aware that Joan was somehow at the root of this new awkwardness. He supposed that Ehrendorf and Joan had had some sort of affair; he remembered the melancholy sigh he had heard from the darkness at the Mayfair on the night of his arrival. But why should that affect his relationship with Ehrendorf?

On the telephone, Ehrendorf sounded more friendly and cheerful, more like his old self. He asked Matthew how he was going to spend the evening, suggesting that they should have a meal together. Matthew explained that Monty had just enlisted him to watch an Irishwoman being fired from a cannon. Perhaps Ehrendorf would like to come, too? As a 'military observer' it could almost be considered his duty.

'OK, I'll meet you at The Great World. There's a place where they sell tickets at the main gate, something like the lodge of an Oxford college (inside you'll find it's more interesting, though!).' And Ehrendorf rang off. It was only on his way to the Blacketts' that Matthew remembered … Joan would be there, too. And that might cause some difficulty.

Presently Matthew found himself in the Blacketts' drawingroom, waiting for Monty and Joan. While the elderly major-domo went off at a dignified pace to alert some member of the family to his presence Matthew took a quick look at the portrait of his father which hung at the end of the room, then he went to sit down on a sofa. A Chinese 'boy' came and placed a packet of cigarettes and some matches at his elbow and then

silently withdrew, leaving him alone except for a long-haired Siamese cat curled up on the floor: this was Kate's beloved pet, Ming Toy. He scooped it up and sat it on his lap. It opened its eyes for a moment, then closed them again.

'Are you a tom-cat, I wonder?' he asked the cat, lifting its magnificent tail to inspect its private parts. He began to rummage about in the animal's fur, peering at it closely for signs of gender. The cat began to purr. Matthew was in the middle of this careful inspection of the cat's hindquarters (its fur was so long and thick one could only guess at what it might conceal) when Walter came into the room. He gave Matthew a rather odd look. Matthew hurriedly let go of the splendid tail and put the cat back on the carpet.

'You're just the man I wanted to see,' said Walter. 'I want you to look at some of these paintings of Rangoon and Singapore in the early days.'

20

'So there you are, my boy, is that not an achievement to be proud of? Over this great area of the globe, covered in steaming swamp and mountain and horrid, horrid jungle, a few determined pioneers, armed only with a little capital and a great creative vision, set the mark of civilization, bringing prosperity to themselves, certainly (though let's not forget that the crocodiles of bankruptcy and disgrace quietly slipped into the water at their passage, ready to seize the rash or unlucky and drag them down into their watery caverns), but above all, a means of livelihood to the unhappy millions of Asiatics who had been faced by misery and destitution until their coming! Such a man was your father!'

Over the years Walter's rhetoric as he conducted his guests on a tour of his collection had grown more solemn and impressive. Here and there fanciful touches had crept in (the crocodiles, for example, which nowadays forged after his intrepid capitalists): if they earned their keep he allowed them to stay; otherwise they were discarded. He had grown more convinced himself of the rightness of what he was saying and more indignant at the absence from history books of the great men of commerce. Surely it was unjust that history should only relate the exploits of bungling soldiers, monarchs and politicians, ignoring the merchant whose activities were the very bedrock of civilization and progress!

On the whole Matthew was inclined to agree with Walter: he, too, considered it odd that great commmercial exploits should have been so neglected in the list of man's achievements. Both courage and a creative intelligence were certainly needed to set up a great commercial enterprise, even one on the scale, relatively small by international standards, of Blackett and Webb. Why, then, did History hesitate? Could it be that History was unhappy about the motives of the great entrepreneurs, or about the social ills that accompanied the undoubted social benefits flowing from these enterprises? Matthew, listening to Walter with one ear, began to ponder this interesting question.

Walter, who had been inclined to fear the worst on first acquaintance with Matthew, had been surprised and gratified to discover that Matthew was quite well-informed about economic conditions in the Far East and in other backward countries of the colonial Empire. Agreed, it was theoretical knowledge, culled from books so that facts and statistics and ideas lodged in his head in a Russian salad of which it was unlikely that any practical use could be made. But still, it was clear that Matthew was interested, as opposed to Monty who was not. Walter even dared to hope that given some experience of the real world of the market-place, and a little time for Joan to make him familiar with the unaccustomed snaffle and bit, something might be made of Matthew, after all. He explained in ringing tones the importance for the morale of Malaya's native masses of Blackett and Webb's jubilee celebrations. Soon these native peoples, like the inhabitants of the British Isles, might find themselves having to fight for their country. They needed an idea to fight for. By a happy chance that idea, by general consent, had been found to be embodied in Blackett and Webb's jubilee slogan: 'Continuity in Prosperity'! And it was here, went on Walter enthusiastically, that Matthew would have his first opportunity to make a contribution to the War Effort; for the jubilee procession planned for New Year's day, after a sequence of floats symbolizing the benefits conferred on the Colony by Blackett and Webb, was to have culminated in the founder sitting on a chair borne by grateful employees. Thus the image of Continuity would be stamped indelibly on the native mind. But, alas, Mr Webb's death had left the chair empty. Who better to fill it than his son, Matthew?

'Oh well,' murmured Matthew vaguely, 'I'd like to help, of course, but that sort of thing isn't really my cup of tea. Not at all. Hm, why don't you try Monty? He'd be much better.'

'Well, we'll see about that,' replied Walter somewhat testily, disappointed by Matthew's lack of enthusiasm. He decided to have a word with Joan: he could see it was high time she started producing some results: 'Are you and Joan going out this evening?' he asked after a pause.

Matthew explained about their proposed trip to The Great World.

'Really, Monty's the limit,' Walter muttered to his wife who had just entered.

At this moment Monty and Joan burst into the room, laughing over something. They both stared at Matthew as if surprised to see him there … But no, that had been the arrangement.

'Well, let's get going,' said Monty. 'We don't want to miss the show. Besides, Sinclair is waiting in the car.'

'But Duff and Diana are coming,' said Mrs Blackett, 'aren't you even going to stay and say hello to them?'

But Monty regretted that they had not a moment to spare. Yes, he would see that Joan was not home too late and, yes, he did have the keys of the Pontiac. If you once got stuck with those 'talkative buggers' from Westminster, he explained to Matthew on the way out, there was no getting away from the 'dreary sods', the evening was as good as ruined.

Standing, for some reason, bolt upright on the back seat of the Pontiac and shading his eyes with his hand, or perhaps saluting although there was nobody in the vicinity except the Malay *syce*, was a tall, thin Army officer of about Monty's age. This was none other than that Sinclair Sinclair with whom Joan had enjoyed such an agreeable voyage from Shanghai some years earlier; in the meantime he had exchanged his career in the Foreign Office for a commission in the Army where, thanks to family connections and the dearth of regular officers which attended the outbreak of war, his rise had been swift; now here he was, instead of fighting Jerry in North Africa, called to put his experience of the Far East at the disposal of Malaya Command and pretty fed up, too (as he had explained to Joan), at finding himself a member of the 'Chairborne Division'!

'Thank heaven!' he cried while they were still at some distance. 'I thought you'd never come. I was beginning to feel like a ca … ca … ca … person abandoned on a desert island!' and he uttered a shrieking laugh, like the working of a dry pump, and with the same sort of hollow gulping coming from his midriff.

'I'm Matthew Webb,' said Matthew, since the young Blacketts, intent on dismissing the *syce* and installing themselves in the Pontiac, had not bothered to introduce them.

'Suh … suh … suh … suh … suh … suh …' Matthew was obliged to pause with his hand in the officer's while this long string of redundant syllables was dragged out of his mouth like entrails, and his smile grew a little fixed as he waited. But finally, with a gulp and a snap of his teeth, the officer was able to bite off the string and exclaim: '… inclair Sinclair!' Matthew, who had taken an immediate liking to him, nodded encouragingly, wondering whether Sinclair was his first name, last name or both at once. It seemed better not to risk an enquiry.

This time Monty was driving, but no less recklessly than the Malay *syce* had done on the previous occasion that Matthew had been in this car. As the Pontiac surged down the drive into humid evening and then turned with screaming tyres on to the road, Monty thumped the steering-wheel jubilantly chanting 'Run, rabbit, run!' Joan sat in front with her slender, sunburned arm gracefully resting on the back of the seat behind her brother. She was wearing a plain, short-sleeved dress of blue cotton, beautifully ironed. How fresh she looked! 'She toils not, neither does she spin,' thought Matthew, gazing in wonder at the beautiful creases in the starched cloth. She turned, her hair tossing in the wind as they hurtled down Grange Road, and gave him a quick, sly smile.

'I'm going to have to duh … duh … dash off early this evening,' shouted Sinclair. 'I go on duty at midnight.'

'I knew it,' said Monty. 'You're going to be a bore, Sinclair. I feel it in my bones.'

'No, I'm not,' protested Sinclair. 'Must watch out for the jolly old Jap, though.'

'You *are* going to be a bore then.' Monty fell into a moody silence until they were approaching The Great World. 'It looks as if we'll have to leave the car and walk. It's been like this every night for the past few weeks with the bloody troops arriving.'

'By the way,' said Matthew, 'Jim Ehrendorf wanted to come so I said we'd meet him at the gate.'

'Oh no! That's all we needed,' grumbled Monty exchanging a glance with his sister. 'What did you do that for?'

They parked the Pontiac in River Valley Road and proceeded on foot. Women shuffled along in the crowd carrying on their backs doll-like babies with shaven heads, some asleep, some peering out in wonder at this strange world with black button eyes. Already by the time they had reached the corner of Kim Seng Road the crowd had thickened considerably.

'Is all this for the human cannonball?'

Monty shook his head. 'Everything goes on here. You'll see. People here are crazy about dancing. They bought the dance-floor out of the old Hôtel de l'Europe which used to be the swanky hotel on the *padang* and had it put here. They sometimes get the orchestras from the P & O boats in dock (or they used to, anyway). Makes a change from Chinks and Filipinos.'

Presently they came to the entrance beneath an archway on which was written in streamlined neon script: *The Great World.* Here a dense crowd of men and women struggled for admission; among them several men in uniform. Suddenly a man in a lighter uniform caught Matthew by the arm: it was Ehrendorf. 'I just got here this moment,' he said cheerfully. 'Hi there, Monty! Hiya Joan!'

'What a surprise,' said Monty without surprise.

'Jim, I'm not sure that you know, ah, Sinclair …' said Matthew.

'Let's get inside before we get crushed to death,' said Joan, ignoring Ehrendorf. 'These soldiers smell like pigs.'

'Look, I just want to hire someone to watch my car while I'm inside so could you wait a moment?' said Ehrendorf, his cheerfulness evaporating. 'I'm afraid the local gashouse gang will have it stripped down if …'

But the young Blacketts had pressed on through the entrance dragging the hesitating Matthew and Sinclair with them.

'Look, shouldn't we wait for Jim?'

'Don't worry, he'll find us all right.'

Matthew had a last glimpse of Ehrendorf's face as Monty propelled him through the entrance and was harrowed to see the expression of suffering on it.

'See you in a minute then,' Ehrendorf called after them and hurried away.

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Matthew now found that he had been shoved into a great circular concourse in the middle of which stood a thicket of bamboo and palms. On one hand was an open-air café whose tables were thronged with rowdy troops drinking beer, on the other a billiards saloon through the tall open windows of which Matthew glimpsed green pyramids of smoke-filled light above the tables and oriental faces glimmering in the surrounding darkness. Farther along was a great hall from within which there came the regular thump of drums and sighing of saxophones.

Together they struck off through the crowd which in some places was so thick that they had to shoulder their way through, passing along a street of stalls with corrugated-iron roofs and flimsy, brightly lit fronts. Some of these stalls were open-air eating-houses festooned with lurid, naked, pink-eyed chickens hung by their necks on hooks, lidded eyes closed in death; beside them were piled varnished ducks and lumps of meat swimming in grease and studded with fat flies gorging themselves; next to the meat laboured a wizened specialist in fish dumplings, and next to him a family of plump Malays beside bubbling cauldrons of *nasi padang*, giant prawns, curried eggs, nuts and *ikan bilis* (dried fish no bigger than your fingernail), all being shovelled on to plates or twisted in cones of leaves. Here a groaning lady was being sawn in half, there another was being put through a mincer with blood horribly gushing out underneath; next came a shooting-gallery where an Australian sergeant in his wide-brimmed hat was using an air-rifle to smash blackened light-bulbs to the jeers of his comrades, and a striptease stall; a neighbouring stall displayed a sign warning of *Waning Virility*: 'Please swallow our Sunlight Pill for Male Persons, Moonlight Pill for Female Persons. Guaranteed.' Beneath the sign was a display of medicine bottles together with a crude and alarming diagram in coloured crayon which was evidently intended to represent sexual organs.

As Matthew paused to study it his arm was suddenly taken by a tall and slender Tamil girl with a pigtail (in which jasmine flowers were intricately braided) hanging to her waist. He nudged up his spectacles to see her better, gazing with surprise into her dark face where a silver stud gleamed in the whorl of each nostril. She was very pretty and he would have liked to talk to her, but the others were already disappearing; and so he disengaged himself apologetically and hurried after them, his heart thumping. How exciting it all was, how much more interesting than Geneva!

Now, hurrying through the crowds in search of his friends, he almost ran full tilt into a makeshift stage (merely boards and trestles) on which a Chinese opera was taking place. Actors and actresses in glorious costumes were declaiming in a penetrating falsetto, impervious to the scene-shifter in khaki shorts and singlet and with a cigarette dangling from his mouth who was rearranging the furniture around them. One of them, with a forked beard reaching to his knees, stalked off into the wings, rolling his eyes in histrionic rage, and a murmur went up from the crowd of Chinese who had gathered to watch. On his way round the side to rejoin the alley which he had left Matthew found himself gazing into the dressing-room, for the sides and back of this miniature theatre were covered only by cloth hangings blowing about in the breeze and allowing him a glimpse of the actresses making-up for the next scene: elaborately rouged and pink-powdered faces glared at mirrors while tweezers prepared a further assault on already well-plucked eyebrows. Several tiny Chinese girls clung to wooden spars also peering in at this arresting sight.

Afraid that he had lost his friends altogether, he pressed on; his progress was slow, nevertheless, for his attention was captured by various wonders which sprang up one after another: a man selling bunches of dried frogs tied together by their legs, a family of acrobats turning somersaults, a stall selling the juices of unfamiliar fruits by the glass, a wizened cashier in a bamboo cage, *satay* morsels skewered on hundreds of bamboo spills roasting over charcoal, sellers of *soto* soup, and *won ton mee*, and apple fritters fizzing in rancid-smelling oil, and *nasi goreng*, and heavenly ice-cream flavoured with mango and durian, and the durian itself, so desired and so dreaded for its peculiar odour, piled in pyramids like cannonballs … and other astonishing sights and events beyond description, taking place, too, in a street crowded with men and women of every shape, size and colour, from a family of performing pygmies, to the graceful, delicate Chinese, to floury, bucolic British and Dutch in voluminous khaki shorts; and accompanied by a cacophony of musical instruments and gramophones in an atmosphere heavy with perfume, incense, sandalwood, sweat and tobacco smoke in the soft, humid air of the tropics.

Matthew recalled the conversation he had had earlier in the evening with Walter and began to ponder the commercial enterprise which had brought about this extraordinary mixture of races and cultures. It was as if the sudden appearance of Western capital in Malaya had created a vacuum which had sucked in people from all the surrounding countries and from much farther away. Would this nation of transients who had come to seek a livelihood under the British Crown one day become a nation with a culture of its own, created somehow out of its own diversity? It had happened in America, certainly, but would it happen here where the divergences of culture were even greater than they had been among the American immigrants? Was a colony like Malaya, as the Communists claimed, a mere sweat-shop for cheap labour operated in the interests of capitalism by cynical Western governments? Or was Western capital (which included his own capital, too, now that his father had died; he must not forget that!) … or was Western capital, as Walter insisted, a

fructifying influence bringing life and hope to millions by making hitherto unused land productive? Or was it perhaps both things at the same time? (Had not Marx himself suggested something of the sort?) To what extent were the affairs of the Straits Settlements and Federated Malay States directed by Britain with the welfare of their inhabitants at heart and to what extent with British commercial interests? that was the root of the question! Matthew had halted again, perturbed. He could see Monty and Joan and Sinclair not too far ahead and he wanted to think this out before rejoining them. But at this moment something odd happened.

Among the strollers, diners and revellers Matthew had been aware, while sinking his teeth into these weighty problems, of a number of painted girls, Chinese or Eurasian, unusually graceful and attractive in their high-collared, straight-cut Shanghai gowns, slit at the side to above the knee. These girls wore their blue-black hair short and marcelled in the Western fashion, but as Matthew stood there, immobilized by thought, he could not help noticing that one of them, strolling arm in arm with another girl, was not only wearing a Western summer frock but also wore her hair long and loose. And even more surprising, for she seemed to be Chinese, when she passed in front of a brightly lit food-stall her hair, which had seemed to be as black as her companion's, glowed dark red around the edges, like a bottle of red ink held up against the light.

She was saying something to the girl beside her and accompanying her words with a sweet smile which revealed a glimmer of white teeth. Matthew, captivated by her appearance, could not help staring at her. Looking up, she noticed his glance and gave a start of surprise, as if she recognized him. With a word to her companion she came boldly up to him, still smiling, and said in a low voice: 'Matthew, I knew your father.' Then, since Matthew merely goggled at her, she went on: 'He was very kind to me. I was so sorry when he died! My name is Vera Chiang … I saw you when you came to the Mayfair with Mr and Miss Blackett, who has also been kind to me … and she is beautiful, too, don't you think? just like Joan Crawford she reminds me of, so lovely … and now, Matthew, you are all alone in the world …' Her eyes had filled with tears of sympathy.

'Good gracious!' murmured Matthew and continued to peer at her in astonishment. He cleared his throat, however, in order to say something more adequate and was about to nudge his glasses up on his nose, but she took hold of his hand and clasped it feelingly in both of hers, saying: 'I was in trouble and your dear father, like a saint of heaven, from the depths of my misery gave me "a bunk up" (please excuse my slang expression of speaking!) and now he has died, it is so sad, it really does give me "the blues" when I think about it and sometimes at night I cry by myself, yes, but forgive me, for you it must be very much worse than for me!' And with emotion she clasped his hand tightly to her chest with both of hers.

'Actually, my father and I weren't all that …'

'Yes, I *know* how you were feeling when you heard this news and I thought "Poor Matthew" because your father had shown me a "snap" of you when small baby and I wondered: "In whatever country in the world will this news reach him?" and your father had told me that when one day he was no more, you, his only son, would be left alone in the world because your dear mother had "kicked the bucket" long ago and there was no one else to look after you.' On an impulse she flicked open a button of her frock and gently slipped his hand through the opening, clasping it with both of hers more tightly than ever to comfort him, with the result that Matthew now found his rather damp palm moulding what appeared to be, well, a naked breast: whatever it was, it was certainly silky, soft, plastic, agreeably resistant and satisfying to the touch. He continued to stand there for some moments enjoying this unusually pleasant sensation, though distinctly bewildered. Meanwhile, they gazed into each other's eyes, hypnotized, and currents of feeling flowed back and forth between them.

At this moment a torrent of inebriated Dutch sailors, their arms on each other's shoulders, half running, half dancing the remains of a drunken hornpipe, scattering the crowd right and left, suddenly came bearing down on them. One moment Matthew was standing there, immobilized by the question of colonial welfare and progress, with the damp palm of his hand neatly moulding a young woman's naked breast, the next he was being jostled by a crowd of chuckling Chinese as they fled before the hornpiping sailors. He was pushed this way and that. He and the young woman were sundered … the hand through which such agreeable sensations had been flowing was brushed away, his spectacles dislodged from his nose and swung perilously from one ear as he struggled to keep his balance. Now a gale of deep-throated laughter blew in his ear, his wrists were grabbed and slung around enormous damp necks, powerful hands closed round his chest, and the next instant he had been whisked away as part of a giant spider's web of sailors from which one or two diminutive Chinese were struggling like flies to extricate themselves. Matthew found himself carried along in a blur of rushing lights and figures, swaying and horn-piping at a terrifying speed, his feet hardly touching the ground, until at last the spider's web's progress was arrested by crashing into a tent where what might have been some rather intimate massage seemed to be taking place. By the time that he, too, had managed to disengage himself and adjust his spectacles, which by a miracle he had not lost (he would have been helpless without them), he was some distance from where he had seen the girl. He went back a little way, looking for her, but the crowd had surged over the place where they had been standing and he could no longer even be quite sure where it had been.

He felt a hand on his arm. He turned and found that it was Monty.

'We thought we'd lost you. What have you been up to? Come on, it's this way.'

'Monty, I must tell you, a really strange thing just happened …'

But Monty was anxious not to miss the beginning of the show and without waiting to hear any more had set

off again towards a distant spot-lit enclosure. From that direction, too, there now came a high-pitched, piercing laugh, like the creaking of a dry pump, or perhaps the lonely cry of a peacock in the dusk.

22

A considerable crowd had assembled to witness the unusual sight of a European lady being fired from a cannon; canvas awnings had been erected to screen the event from those reluctant to pay the price of admission but here and there the fabric was torn and small boys fought for places at peepholes. Inside the enclosure an elaborate scene had been set: on the right stood the cannon, its long barrel, mottled with green and brown camouflage in the best military manner, protruding from a two-dimensional cardboard castle on which was written *Fortress Singapore.* Behind the cannon loomed the giant papiermâché heads of Chiang Kai-shek and King George VI, the former with a legend hung round his neck: *'Kuo* (Country), *Min* (People), *Tang* (Party). World friend with all Peace-loving Peoples!' together with a similar legend in Chinese ideographs beside it. 'God Save King' said a more prefunctory legend around the King's neck.

On the left, at a distance of some fifty yards, stretched a large net and, in front of the net, an impressively realistic armoured-car constructed of paper and thin wooden laths. From its turret there reared, like snakes from a basket, a fistful of hideously grinning bespectacled heads in military caps; towering above these heads, like a king cobra ready to strike, was yet another bespectacled snake's head which was surely, thought Matthew, intended as a caricature of the young Emperor Hirohito. Any doubt but that this was intended to be the cannon's target was dispelled by a sign on the armoured-car which declared: 'Hated Invader of Beloved China Homeland.'

'But where are the Da Sousa Sisters?' demanded Monty. 'I thought they were part of the show.' The programme he had bought consisted of a single folded sheet, on the outside of which was a blurred photograph of a bulky, helmeted figure, presumably the human ammunition; inside, it read:

1 Advance of atrocious enemy.
2 Cannon fires.
3 Miss Olive Kennedy-Walsh, BA (Pass Arts), H Dip Ed, TCD will hurtle through air towards advancing disagreeable aggressor.
4 Treacherous aggressor smashed. (Mgt not responsible.)
5 Voluntary contributions to China Heroic War Effort gratefully received.
6 God sake King.
7 End.
8 Please to exit. Thank you for custom.
Paper model supplied courtesy Chou & Son, Undertaker and Funeral Preparation. All Religions catered for. Sago Lane, Singapore.

'End as you wish you had begun.'

'Oh, that's nothing,' said Monty to Matthew, who had remarked on the excellence of the imitation armoured-car. 'You should see the Cadillacs and houses and ocean liners and whatnot they make for rich *towkays* to take away with them to the next world. It's a skilled profession. The Chinese can be pretty simple-minded,' he added with a sneer.

'Where *are* those suh … suh … suh … sisters? This is a duh … hm … liberate swindle, don't you think so, Monty?'

But a pink-faced young planter nearby, overhearing Sinclair's complaint, assured him that the Da Sousa Sisters had already made their appearance. They had sung a number of songs, including 'Chocolate Soldier' and, of course, their signature tune: 'Halloa! halloa! halloa!' He doubted whether they would appear again that evening.

'Just our luck,' grumbled Monty.

'I don't think Jim will ever find us,' Matthew was saying, but at that moment he saw Ehrendorf shouldering his way into the enclosure. Meanwhile, a portable gramophone was being vigorously wound by one of the stage-hands. Another Chinese in a white dinner-jacket took the microphone. 'Just in time,' said Ehrendorf cheerfully. 'I wouldn't have missed this for anything.' Joan was sitting at the end of the row and he sat down next to her. But she stood up immediately, saying to Monty and Sinclair: 'Move along. I want to sit next to Matthew.' With some confusion, because the gap between the rows of seats was narrow, she struggled to the place which opened up between Sinclair and Matthew. Ehrendorf flushed and stared grimly down at the arena.

Now the star of the performance, Miss Kennedy-Walsh, was being announced: she was a strongly built woman in her thirties, dressed from head to foot in an aviator's suit of white silk which perfectly modelled her impressive figure: the audience murmured in appreciation of her well-formed thighs, her generous breasts, her strong jaw and pink face.

'Will she ever squeeze down the barrel?' joked Ehrendorf tensely.

‘Big ah blests number one!’ remarked a smartly dressed young Chinese beside Matthew giving the thumbs-up sign. Matthew had already noticed by the pin-ups displayed at the ‘virility’ stall how the Chinese seemed to admire big-bosomed women.

Miss Kennedy-Walsh, indeed, was not finding it easy to insert herself in the barrel. Her splendid thighs she fitted in with comparative ease; somehow, aided by the slippery material of her suit, she also managed to cram her hips into the muzzle. But her breasts remained obstinately stuck on the rim and with her arms pinned to her sides she was helpless. Stuck! Her face flushed with irritation. A murmur of concern arose from the audience. ‘Glory be to God, will ye give us a shove, y’lazy gombeens!’

A hasty conference of the Chinese organizers was already taking place. They scratched their heads and stared at Miss Kennedy-Walsh’s too ample bosom and then they stared at the cannon and scratched their heads again. The master of ceremonies put his hands on her shoulders and shoved politely, but that did not help. If anything it made things worse. Miss Kennedy-Walsh slipped down a few inches but her bosom remained on the rim and her face grew redder.

‘Will we be stayin’ here all the night or what?’ she demanded furiously. Her mouth could be seen working but her further comments were drowned by the martial music which suddenly started up. Matthew, who had been watching with interest and concern, stiffened suddenly as he felt Joan’s hand creep into his own and his pulse quickened.

In the meantime someone had had an idea and a Chinese lady had been invited on to the stage. She was heavily made-up and, despite the heat, wore a brilliant feather boa round her neck. She had evidently been hastily summoned from other duties and appeared flustered. The master of ceremonies, explaining what he wanted her to do, made kneading motions and pointed at the recalcitrant breasts. A sheet was modestly thrown over the muzzle and Miss Kennedy-Walsh’s protruding head and torso. The lady with the boa vanished underneath it; the gramophone continued to play martial music. When, after a few moments, the sheet was whipped away again, there was no sign of Miss Kennedy-Walsh. A ripple of applause echoed around the enclosure.

Now the show was beginning in earnest. The master of ceremonies, first in Cantonese, then in Malay, then in English, asked the audience on a given signal to count down from ten. A spotlight was directed on a man by the breech of the cannon holding a lanyard: he smiled nervously; a wheel was spun and the barrel elevated. Another spotlight was directed on to the model armoured-car with its wavering, two-dimensional Japanese effigies. Long ropes had been attached to the front of the armoured-car which now began to move very slowly, dragged by two Chinese stage-hands, from behind the net and on towards ‘Fortress Singapore’. A high ramp had been set up in front of the net and the armoured-car obligingly diverted from its course and, instead of continuing to advance directly on the Fortress, started to climb it. The martial music had come to a stop, replaced by a long roll of drums. The counting began. Ten … nine … eight … The armoured-car had almost reached the top of the ramp … Three … two … one … Fire! The man holding the lanyard jerked it, but nothing happened A gasp of dismay went up from the spectators. In the silence that followed, muffled comments could be heard from inside the barrel of the cannon. Monty consulted his programme: ‘We seem to have got stuck on number 2: “cannon fires”.’

Another hasty conference took place, this time around the breech. While it was taking place the men with the ropes, somewhat apprehensively, darted up the ramp under the eye of the cannon, seized the armoured-car and carried it back to its original position; then they took up their stations once more with the ropes. Presently, after another roll of drums and a few adjustments by a man with a spanner, they were again given the signal to start pulling. The armoured-car began to climb! Ten … nine … eight … The nervous strain was clearly telling on the men with the ropes: the vehicle was advancing jerkily, now halting, now bounding forward. Three … two … one … Fire! A tremendous explosion echoed around The Great World and a white projectile went winging its way in a glittering arc beneath the black vault of the sky. Swooning with excitement, the men with the ropes gave a great pull: the armoured-car shot over the top of the ramp and down the other side just as Miss Kennedy-Walsh hurtled by where it had been standing an instant before; on she went to land helmet first in the net; there she jumped and arched and flapped like a netted salmon.

Missed! This was not a contingency for which the men holding the ropes had prepared themselves. They looked at each other helplessly. What were they to do? Even the most perfunctory realism required them to continue pulling. The armoured-car turned its nose hesitatingly towards ‘Fortress Singapore’ and continued, slowly but steadily, to convey its wavering cargo of grinning, bespectacled Japanese towards where the cannon loomed, bereft of ammunition. A roar of indignation went up from the crowd. The master of ceremonies hurriedly intervened and the armoured car was whisked away, Miss Kennedy-Walsh took a bow. A collection in favour of the Nanyang Anti-Enemy Backing-up Society was announced.

‘Let’s go and have a drink,’ said Monty, who seemed satisfied with the way the show had turned out despite the nonappearance of the Da Sousa Sisters. As they made their way towards the exit the crowd was beginning to sing: ‘God save glacious King!’

They set off down another alley; the crowds strolling up and down had grown even more dense than they had been earlier. Monty, Joan and Sinclair walked in front. Matthew followed at a little distance with Ehrendorf; he wanted to think of some way of comforting his friend who was still clearly upset by the way Joan had changed places in the enclosure. Moreover, he was worried that if he walked beside Joan, she might

not be able to resist the temptation of holding his hand in full view of the others, thus causing Ehrendorf further unnecessary chagrin. Matthew could not help thinking it curious that she should find him attractive. Very few other women ever had. He had tried to accept this, as he tried to accept everything, philosophically.

But above all Matthew simply wanted to talk with his old friend and to recover their former intimacy, for Ehrendorf was one of those rare people who could be interesting whatever he talked about. Matthew enjoyed argument and speculation the way other people enjoy a game of tennis. Furthermore, although he did not mind the particular, it was the general which really stirred him. It was not enough for him to know, for example, that two Catholics were pitched out of a window in Prague in the interests of the Jesuits and Ferdinand of Styria early in the seventeenth century (as it would be for you and me), Matthew immediately wanted to investigate the general implications of the deed. And he would speculate lovingly on whether or not it had been *necessary* (not merely a coincidence) that a period of intolerance should follow the Emperor Rudolph's liberal reign, or on some other quite different aspect of the matter … on religion as against economics as a cause of war, or (even more far-fetched) on the effect of windows, and of glass generally, on the Bohemian psyche, or on the marriage of physical and mental enlightenment (windows, lamps, electric light advancing hand in hand with rational thought) in the progress of humanity.

Of course, people change. Matthew and Ehrendorf had both undoubtedly changed in the years since they had argued into the night in Oxford and Geneva. Matthew had realized even in Geneva that he himself was beginning to change: he no longer enjoyed arguing with his friends, above all those who had embraced the academic life, quite as much as he had once done. It was not simply that these friends had tended to adopt the lugubrious and self-important air which distinguishes academics: surrounded by the paralysing comforts, conveniences and irritations of university life what else could they do? He sensed that what distressed him was a gap which had opened up between thought and feeling, the remoteness, the impartiality of his friends to the subjects they were teaching or studying. Objectivity, he had had to agree with them, was important obviously. But what was required, he had declared, striding up and down with their vintage port inside him while they eyed him dubiously wondering whether he would wake the children, was 'a passionate objectivity' (whatever that might be). He had usually found himself taking the last bus home feeling muddled and dissatisfied with himself as well as with his friends. Yet with Ehrendorf it had always been a little different, perhaps because, coming from a military family, he had chosen to become a soldier rather than an academic, though more likely it was simply a difference of personality. Whatever the reason, in Geneva he had always found it delightfully easy to discuss things with Ehrendorf.

Now, just as if they had been strolling along the Quai Wilson instead of through a pulsing, perfumed, malodorous, humid, tropical evening, Matthew brushed aside some trivial enquiry from Ehrendorf about Sinclair (who was he? how long had Joan known him? were they particularly close friends, perhaps even childhood friends?) and reverted to the important matter which had stopped him in his tracks earlier. Could the coming of western capital to the Far East be seen as progress from the natives' point of view?

'I'm sure you've heard Walter's lecture on how he and my father and some other merchants transformed Burma from a country, where, unless a coconut fell off a tree, nobody had any supper, into a modern rice-exporting nation … I gather he delivers it to everyone he comes across …'

'Well,' sighed Ehrendorf, automatically falling into his old Oxford habits, 'it all depends what you mean by …'

'Progress? Or natives?'

'Well, by both, I guess,' Ehrendorf smiled faintly, 'since there was massive immigration of Indians and *their* situation must have been different from that of the Burmese. Walter certainly exaggerates. Burma was a fertile and prosperous country before the British took over. But you mustn't think that a barter economy is like Paradise before the Fall: a cash economy has more resources to survive floods, typhoons, and whatnot, even if it does introduce certain difficulties of its own which were not there before.'

'Difficulties! Why, the rice merchants knocked Burma for six! The whole culture was destroyed. The old communal village life collapsed. Almost overnight it became every man for himself. People started fencing off grazing land which used to belong to the whole village and so forth. Profit took a grip on the country like some dreadful new virus against which nobody had any resistance. When the Burmese were reduced to becoming migrant seasonal workers in the paddy fields the old village life was finished off completely … and with it went everything that made life more than a pure money-grubbing exercise. At one time they used to hold elaborate cattle races, and water festivals, and village dances and theatricals and puppet shows. They all vanished. And what replaced them? A huge increase in the crime rate! To be happy people need to live in communities. If you don't believe me you can read it in the government reports!'

'Sure, I believe you,' said Ehrendorf rather vaguely. 'But still, this is a partial view. You must look at the whole picture.

'By the way, just look at that Indian bloke over there in his striped tie and cricket blazer, modelled on some fatuous English tradition that has no *real* meaning for him at all. He's borrowed a culture that doesn't fit him any better than his jacket.'

Ehrendorf, while looking at the whole picture, had also had his eye on the Blacketts and Sinclair some way in front of them; perhaps he, too, was no longer as keen as he used to be on abstract discussions, or perhaps he was preoccupied with other matters. He had grown thinner since he and Matthew had last met in Europe

and had developed one or two hesitations in his manner which had not been there before. Once or twice Matthew had been on the verge of that nightmare sensation when you suddenly find yourself thinking: 'But I don't know this person at all!' and the person in question happens to be your closest friend. But now a glance at Ehrendorf reassured him: it was the same old Ehrendorf, except for the moustache; a little older, of course, and not quite so cheerful and self-confident as he had once been. But then, he himself had aged, too.

Ehrendorf's fine eyes rested on Joan's botttom as she walked some distance ahead between her brother and Sinclair; the light blue, neatly ironed cotton of her dress picked up the glow of naphtha lanterns as she passed each stall so that, from a distance, it seemed that her figure flared and died, flared and died, almost hypnotically. Very often a girl's bottom begins to sag in her twenties (which does not matter particularly since few people notice or care whether a bottom has dropped or not) but Joan's had not done so; from behind you might have thought that she was simply a mature adolescent. Nor had she developed those over-bulging cones of tissue at the top of the thigh which sometimes bestow even on a slender woman a saddle-bag effect. 'Her bottom is too perfect,' Ehrendorf might have been thinking as he stared ahead in a trance. 'It's too beautiful to get a purchase on, like everything else about her, it simply slips out of your hand.'

Matthew, however, could not be expected to notice this sort of thing. Besides, it was doubtful whether, even if he had been interested, he would have been able to see far enough without taking off his spectacles and polishing them: in the course of the evening a thick film of dust had collected on the lenses.

'Sinclair must be a new arrival in Singapore, I should think,' remarked Ehrendorf. 'Although he seems to know his way round OK.' This was undoubtedly a statement rather than a question but, nevertheless, a vague air of interrogation lingered about it. Matthew, however, paid no attention: he was evidently still too busy trying to express what was in his mind.

'Let me give you an example, Jim, of what happens when cash and the idea of profit strike root in a country unaccustomed to them like Burma. It seems that's there a ghastly Darwinian principle of economics known as the Law of Substitution which declares, more or less, that "the cheapest will survive". This has all sorts of unpleasant consequences, one of which is that non-economic values tend to be eliminated. In Burma they used to build beautiful, elaborately carved cargo-boats which looked like galleons: these have been entirely replaced over the past fifty years by flat barges which can transport paddy more cheaply. And it's the same everywhere you look: native art and craft replaced by cheap imported substitutes, handlooms have disappeared, pottery has given way to petrol tins. Even the introduction of new crops by western capital has tended to impoverish rather than enrich the life people lead. In Burma the natives used to cook with sesamum oil, now they use ground-nut oil because, though it doesn't taste so good, it's cheaper. In Java people have taken to eating cassava instead of rice because it's cheaper …'

'If it's cheaper,' protested Ehrendorf, 'then they have more wealth to spend on other things.'

'Not so! If they can live more cheaply it stands to reason that they can be paid less, provided there's no shortage of labour. Yes, exactly, it's our old friend "the iron law" up to its tricks again! What additional wealth may be generated by the use of cheaper methods and cheaper foods doesn't cling to the natives: the extra saving goes to swell the profits of the western businesses which control the land or the market … like Blackett and Webb! The native masses are worse off than before. For them the coming of Capitalism has really been like the spreading of a disease. Their culture is gone, their food is worse and their communities have been broken up by the need to migrate for work on estates and in paddy fields. Well, am I right?'

'But Marx believed, did he not, that such a stage is necessary in the progress of society from feudalism to Communism and therefore even saw the British in India as a force for progress.'

'You can't have it both ways! What you and Marx say is fine … that is, if Communism is what you *want*. But what if we reach this stage where the poor are made poorer and organized into gangs of coolies and then … lo and behold, *there is no revolution*! Are the natives not worse off than they were in their traditional communities? Of *course* they are! You still have to show me what advantages the coming of western capital has brought, in Burma at any rate.' After a moment Matthew added: 'In any event, my bet is that in practice Communism would be scarcely any better than Capitalism, and perhaps even worse.'

Ahead of them Monty, Joan and Sinclair had disappeared into the Wing Choon Yuen Restaurant whose palatial entrance was partly screened from the alley by a substantial brick and pillar wall: on top of this wall neat rows of palms had been set in brown earthenware pots decorated with dragons. Ehrendorf said: 'This is still a partial view, Matthew. No doubt there is something in what you say. But in the West, too, craftsmen have been unable to survive mass-production, capitalism and the Law of Substitution. That's life, I guess.' He shrugged and added with a smile: 'There's another principle which I shall call Ehrendorf's Law which is now in operation in all prosperous Western countries and which asserts "the survival of the easiest". Twenty years from now coffee beans will have disappeared and we'll drink nothing but Camp Coffee, not because liquid coffee tastes better … it tastes worse … but because it's easier to prepare. Pretty soon nobody will read books or learn to play the piano because it's easier to listen to the radio or phonograph. Mark my words! Ehrendorf's Law will do just as much damage in the long run! All the same, Matthew, I can't agree with you because you neatly avoid mentioning all the benefits of western civilization, the social welfare, education, medicine and so forth. But let's discuss that another time. And by the way, it has just occurred to me, if this guy Sinclair *had* been an old family friend of the Blacketts I'm sure I'd have seen him or heard of him in the last couple of years …'

‘Let’s not bother with the Blacketts … I want to discuss my theories,’ said Matthew.

It was then that Ehrendorf suddenly went silent and looked rather upset. It had occurred to him that Matthew, far from being too preoccupied with his own ideas to discuss Sinclair and his mysterious relationship with Joan, had all this time been deliberately keeping the conversation away from the Blacketts.

Matthew had not noticed his friend’s reaction and, following him into the restaurant, muttered grimly: ‘Oh, education and medicine. Don’t worry. One could say something on that score, too!’

23

Monty, Joan and Sinclair were seated at a table set among foliage on the *terrasse*. As Matthew and Ehrendorf approached, Sinclair got to his feet saying: ‘Got to duh … duh … ash off, I’m afraid. Got to do my duh … duh … duh …’

‘Of course you haven’t,’ said Monty. ‘Sit down, Sinclair, you’re being a bore. It’s nowhere near midnight yet. You said you didn’t go on duty till midnight. Well then?’

‘Got to duh … duh … duhoo … well, a whole lot of things, a fearful amount, in fact. So, have a nice time and I’ll be suh … seeing you,’ he added in a fluent rush. He kissed Joan’s hand, rolling his eyes for some reason, waved to the others and departed.

The young Blacketts had ordered *ikan merah* (fish, Matthew understood) and chips and a large bottle of Tiger beer between them. Matthew and Ehrendorf ordered the same. While they waited a rather tense silence fell over the table: even Monty, not usually at a loss for words, seemed disinclined to speak. In the dark shadows behind Joan glowed a shower of delicate, speckled marmalade-coloured orchids, framing her perfect face and shoulders. Ehrendorf snatched a quick glance in her direction and then, though he had already given his order, buried himself in the menu. While his eyes moved silently over *won ton* soup, crab sweetcorn soup, sweet sour prawn, Taoist fish ball, cornedbeef sandwich, lychee almond beancurd … his face took on a strained and innocent expression, as if he were thinking: ‘The trouble about such perfection is that you can’t get a grip on it, it slips away. There’s no perspective.’

‘Will you kindly stop that!’ said Joan suddenly and with anger.

‘Stop what?’

‘Looking at me in that stupid way.’

‘I wasn’t looking at you at all. I was reading the goddam menu, if you don’t mind.’ Ehrendorf’s voice had grown shrill and his accent, which normally might have been taken for English, suddenly became that of an American again. Matthew took off his dust-filmed spectacles, polished them on a rather grey handkerchief, put them on again and stared unhappily at Ehrendorf.

‘What I wanted to say, Jim, about education and medicine …’

Silence, however, fell over the table once more. Matthew examined the wall and the dragons which decorated the earthenware pots; from beyond the palms which grew out of them came the constant murmur of voices and laughter and the throbbing of music. Presently, a Chinese girl appeared with a bowl from which she took a steaming face-flannel with a pair of wooden tongs and placed it in Joan’s hands: she then offered one to Monty, Matthew and Ehrendorf in turn. Matthew mopped his perspiring face: the sensation of relief this afforded was extraordinary. More waiters presented themselves, bringing fish and chips and beer. As they began to eat the atmosphere grew more relaxed. Matthew, knife and fork raised and ready to pounce on his fish (he was hungry), cautiously raised the subject of education. Admittedly, he had yet to delve deeply into the matter as it affected Malaya but he did know what the British had managed to achieve in this line in India … namely, a prodigious number of unemployable graduates. ‘The Indians have always had a tremendous desire for education. The only trouble is that there are hardly any actual *jobs* for educated men to do, unless they want to be clerks or lawyers, and there are already several times too many of *them*.’

Monty had taken knife and fork and begun vigorously to chop up his fish, first laterally into quarters, then diagonally, as for the Union Jack, but most likely this was not the mute response of a patriot to the drift of Matthew’s argument so much as a convenient way of reducing the fish to pieces small enough to deal with; he speared one of the pieces together with a bundle of chips and stuffed the lot into his mouth.

‘All we needed in India were Indians educated enough to serve as clerks and petty officials: in no time at all there were enough of them, and several times too many. Curzon did his best to launch vocational and technical education and I gather it’s been tried here in Malaya, too. But with miserable results. You may well ask why.’

None of Matthew’s listeners seemed, as it happened, to be on the point of putting that or any other question to him. Monty, breathing heavily through his mouth, seemed completely occupied in masticating fish and chips. Joan and Ehrendorf simply stared at Matthew, looking tense and dazed; Joan had not touched her knife and fork but now picked up a single chip in her fingers and snipped off the end with her perfect teeth, without taking her eyes from Matthew’s face.

‘The fact is that in most tropical colonies the only work available is agriculture, and sometimes a bit of mining. What we really want is cheap unskilled labour. What skilled jobs there are in a country like Malaya don’t go, it appears, to Malays, but to Eurasians, Chinese or sometimes Europeans. No cheap unskilled labour

is what western capital came here for and that's what it gets …!'

'But …' began Monty. He was silenced immediately, however, by his own right hand which, spotting its opportunity, had raised another forkful of fish and chips and now crammed it into his mouth as soon as it opened to speak.

'As I expect you all know there was talk of starting an engineering school a couple of years ago at Raffles College here in Singapore. What happened? A commision reported that it was pointless because there'd be no jobs for the graduates. So you see the idea that we British are educating our colonies in our own image simply won't wash. That may be what we'd like to do, and certain attempts have been made no doubt, but that's not what is actually happening.'

'Oh, look here,' said Ehrendorf mildly, but to Joan not to Matthew. 'This is a bit ridiculous.' Joan, her eyes still on Matthew snipped off another inch of the chip she held neatly between finger and thumb, but otherwise ignored him.

Matthew went on: 'And yet there still persists this sad belief that a man can better himself by education. At this *very* moment here in Singapore, according to the official figures, there are more than ten thousand clerks, most of whom live in the most dreadful conditions earning ten dollars a month if they're lucky, not even a living wage, simply because their numbers far exceed any possible demand for them. Ten thousand clerks for a city of this size! It seems it's a regular practice for older clerks to be replaced by younger men at lower salaries and yet that doesn't stop the schools turning out another seven hundred boys every year with qualifications for clerical jobs. And all because of this pathetic, unfounded belief that education leads to lucrative jobs!'

'Really, you can't expect me to put up with this,' said Ehrendorf suddenly.

'Well, clear off then! Nobody invited you, anyway.'

'As it happens, Matthew did.'

'Frankly,' said Monty, pushing away his empty plate and selecting a toothpick, 'I don't think it matters a bugger whether they work as coolies or anything else so long as they have jobs. That's precisely what they don't have in South China and India. They come here because they think it's better, and they're damn right. It is.'

'I thought you said you were going. If so, what're you waiting for?'

'That's just what you'd like, isn't it?'

'Monty, surely we have a *responsibility*,' went on Matthew doggedly, 'to the people living here when we arrived; even more so to those we encouraged to come and work on the estates. One of the most astounding things about our Empire, when you come to think about it, is the way we've transported vast populations across the globe as cheap labour. Surely we must have their interests at heart, at least to some extent, as well as our own. Otherwise it's not much better than the slave trade.'

'We do have their interests at heart: we're giving them employment which they didn't have where they came from. Besides, almost half our rubber in Malaya is produced by Asiatic smallholders, people who probably came here originally as coolies and then set up in business for themselves. They produce pretty piss-awful rubber but that's their business.'

'Let's go and dance,' said Joan. 'Monty, pay the bill and let's go.'

Monty summoned the waiter and produced a roll of blue dollar bills, saying: 'Without British capital there wouldn't have been any rubber business.'

'But don't you think, given the huge returns on money invested in Malaya that something more should be done for the people who actually do the work on the plantations to produce it …? Otherwise, the British Empire is nothing more than a vast business concern …' But Matthew's last words, though intended for his companions, had been transformed into a soliloquy by their sudden departure, Joan in the lead, Ehrendorf striving to walk beside her and speak to her, and the burly figure of Monty not far behind. Matthew hurried after them, nudging his glasses up on his nose.

As they approached The Great World's dance-hall the atmosphere seemed to thicken, as if the very dust which hung in the air was quivering with the percussion of drums and wailing of saxophones. Monty dropped back for a moment, indicating that he had something he wanted to say to Matthew. No, it wasn't about the colonial question, he muttered confidentially, it was more of a proposition he wanted to make. He'd thought it over quite a bit and consulted his two chums who were also very, very interested (that went without saying, actually, because in its way this was a bargain such as one didn't often come across and so *of course* they would be interested) and, well, the upshot of it was that he and his two chums had decided unanimously to invite Matthew to join them in … the point being that he was a chap from the same sort of background as they were, a factor one had to bear in mind in a place like Singapore where gossip got around in no time … anyway, in short, they'd decided that Matthew should be given the opportunity of making up the fourth … No, nothing like that, he hated all card-games himself, couldn't abide them, in fact, well … in a nutshell, instead of risking heaven knows *what* dreadful diseases with the sort of women one was likely to pick up here at The World or anywhere else in Singapore he and his chums had decided to club together and they'd found a very nice Chinese girl called Sally who had her own flat in Bukit Timah. She was clean and not the kind who'd get drunk or make a fuss. She was …

'Oh, but really, Monty…'

‘No, just listen a moment. You aren’t a bad sort of bloke, Matthew, in your way (in fact, I quite like you), but you’re the sort of chap who rejects things out of hand without even listening and weighing up the pros and cons. And this is just the kind of arrangement that would suit a bloke like you who isn’t very good at getting women, if you don’t mind me saying so, and besides, *it’s not expensive* …’

‘Monty, I can assure you …’

They had now joined Joan and Ehrendorf in the queue of people, many of whom were in uniform, waiting for admission to the dance-hall. Monty lowered his voice a little so that his sister should not hear what he was saying. She was clean, she had imagination (which was something one didn’t often find), she was good-tempered and sober, she was not narrow-minded in her approach (in fact, you could do almost anything you liked) and it would only come to $17.50 a month per person. It was such a bargain that Matthew probably thought he meant *American* dollars, but not a bit of it! He meant Straits dollars. It was an incredible opportunity! For $17.50 Matthew would have, at least to begin with, one evening a week *guaranteed* and the possibility of another, if one of his three partners did not exercise his option for two evenings in that particular week, as would most likely very often happen because of some social occasion they couldn’t get out of, OK? Because Matthew was the last to join it was only fair, after all, that the others should have first choice but he, Monty, for one would be most surprised if it did not work out that Matthew found he had two evenings on most weeks …’

‘Hey, Yank! Why don’t you join in the bloody war then?’ demanded a perspiring, drunken Tommy, waving a beer bottle at Ehrendorf.

‘Because we don’t want to make it too easy for you guys,’ replied Ehrendorf cheerfully.

‘Give us some gum, chum!’ shouted someone else and there was a cackle of laughter.

‘Because you’re a lot o’ pissin’, cowards, that’s what!’ shouted the first man belligerently.

‘Who needs the bleedin’ Yanks anyway? Old Adolf would only give ’m a spankin’!’

Raucous cheers greeted this remark but Ehrendorf, still smiling good-humouredly, had reached the bamboo cage and handed over fifty cents for himself and each of his companions. Then he waved to the boisterous crowd in khaki behind him and vanished into the throbbing darkness followed by a medley of cheers, insults and ribaldry.

‘Yankee ponce!’

‘They ’ave ’em ’orizontal wi’ teeth in ’em ’ere, sir!’

‘Can I do yer now, sir?’

Blundering after his friend, Matthew presently found himself at the edge of a dance-floor, covered but open at the sides for ventilation, gleaming with French chalk in the semi-darkness like a subterranean lake. So this was the famous dance-floor taken from the old Hôtel de l’Europe which, Joan was now whispering huskily into his ear, at the turn of the century had been the finest in Singapore. No doubt his father, together with the wealthy and influential in the Colony, in his day had waltzed or fox-trotted on those very boards! But now the *beau monde* had been replaced by that bewildering array of races and types he had noticed earlier in the evening in the open air, even two members of the family of pygmies could be seen executing a perfect tango close at hand. Matthew gazed enchanted at the teeming dance-floor. Abruptly, he realized why this sight gave him such pleasure. He tried to explain to Monty who had taken Joan’s place at his side: *this was the way Geneva should have been*! Instead of that grim segregation by nationality they should have all spent their evenings like this, dancing the tango or the quick-step or the *ronggeng* or whatever it was with each other: Italians with Abyssinians, British with Japanese, Germans with Frenchmen and so on. If there had been a real feeling of brotherhood in Geneva such as there was here (the Palais des Nations turned into a *palais de danse*) the Disarmament Conference would not have got stuck in the mud the way it did! ‘It was the feeling, perhaps even the *confidence* that men of different nations and races could get on together that was so tragically missing. And yet here is the evidence! Men are brothers!’

‘Yes, er, I see what you mean,’ mumbled Monty cautiously, ‘but about that other matter we were discussing. I mean, well, you think it over. There’s no need to make a snap decision, Matthew. On the other hand we do know plenty of blokes who would jump at the chance if we offered it to them, so you can’t keep us waiting indefinitely.’

‘But I’m not keeping you waiting, Monty. I’ve told you, I’m not…’

‘No, well, you think it over,’ muttered Monty hastily. ‘No need to make a snap decision.’ And he started to explain to the rather bewildered Matthew how to set about dancing with a taxi-dancer. You first of all had to buy a book of four twenty-five-cent dance tickets from the bloke over there. Then when music started you made a dash for the one you liked the look of. But you had to make it snappy or someone else would grab her. At the end of the dance she took you back to her table and you handed over a ticket. You weren’t allowed to sit with them unless you paid a special fifteen-dollar fee for taking them away from the taxi tables.

‘Thanks Monty, but I think I just want to watch.’

‘You would!’ murmured Monty inaudibly.

Meanwhile, however, the tango had turned into an exhibition by a Filipino couple who were chased somewhat haphazardly round the floor by a white spotlight; the man was a foxy-looking individual in a white suit, the woman, a sinuous person in sequins with flashing eyes and raven tresses. The music changed tempo and they began jitterbugging violently, shoes flashing. The grinning members of the band were also from the

Philippines; clad in dazzling white blazers and orange trousers they formed a shallow bank against the far wall, harmonizing satisfactorily with the lurid, unlikely birds which had been painted on it. Overhead, painted on the ceiling, Matthew could just make out the shape of a gigantic golden dragon whose bulging eyes, faceted with mirrors, showered reflected sparks like confetti on the swaying dancers below. Now the spotlight, outguessed by the movement of the dancers, strayed for a moment to the edge of the floor and hesitated there by coincidence on Joan and Ehrendorf. He was talking intensely into her ear while she stared unseeing at the polished floor, tapping her foot moodily to the beat of the music. He looked up for a moment, dazzled and bewildered; Joan shook her head, tossing her hair. The spotlight moved jerkily away in pursuit of its quarry.

Saddened by the look of desperation on his friend's face, Matthew shifted his attention to the taxi-girls sitting at tables beside the floor, wondering whether the girl whose breast he had found himself clasping earlier in the evening might not be among them: these girls, too, appeared to be Chinese or Eurasian for the most part, with a few Malays, Siamese and Indo-Chinese; undoubtedly, thought Matthew, these women from further up the peninsula towards China were the loveliest and most graceful of all with their glistening black eyes and delicate features: beside them even the delicate Joan looked clumsy, heavy and rough-skinned. Ehrendorf, however, did not seem to think so for he had taken Joan by the wrist and was trying to persuade her to join him on the floor which, temporarily deserted, now began to fill up. The band set to work on another tune. Men of all descriptions, from dimunitive Chinese clerks to enormous tipsy Australians, swarmed across the floor to secure the services of the taxi-girls. Ehrendorf tried to lead Joan on to the dance-floor but she resisted, snatching her hand away from him. Ehrendorf then seemed to give up hope all of a sudden: his chest deflated, his shoulders drooped, he passed a hand over his forehead as if dazed.

'Well, have you thought it over about that nifty Chinese girl I was telling you about?'

'Monty, I told you before: it's not my line.'

Monty looked taken aback: 'There's no need to decide right away, old boy. I don't want to rush you. And look here, if you have only one evening a week we could probably fix it so you don't have to pay quite so much. After all, that's only fair, isn't it? How about fifteen dollars a month? It's really worth it, you know. God, boy, she goes at it hammer and tongs, I can tell you!'

'It's not the price, for heaven's sake. It's the idea of it.'

Monty stared at Matthew, baffled. It had not occurred to him that Matthew would drive such a hard bargain. Or could there perhaps be some other explanation? And then an idea struck him.

'If you think you'll get it from her,' he said warningly, indicating his sister who was standing a few paces away, 'I'm afraid you're barking up the wrong tree. I know lots of blokes who've been out with her and she doesn't.'

'Doesn't what?' asked Matthew. And then added hurriedly: 'Oh, sorry, I see what you mean …'

But Monty, nevertheless, uttered the heavy sigh of someone whose patience has been tried beyond endurance. 'She doesn't,' he repeated. And then, just to rub it in: 'Not even *occasionally*!'

24

Matthew's head was reeling as he and Monty and Joan passed out of The Great World and into Kim Seng Road; for a moment he felt quite giddy and had to steady himself with a hand on the wall. Ehrendorf, shattered, had left half an hour earlier by himself; before leaving he had said to Joan: 'We must have a serious talk. I'll look in this evening if you're not back too late.' Joan had replied that he could do what he liked. She was accustomed to young men wanting to have serious talks with her. After a moment Matthew felt well enough to remove his hand from the wall and proceed: it was doubtless the effect of the unaccustomed heat and the crowds which had caused that moment of dizziness. Outside the gate there were fewer people to be seen; the stars shone brilliantly and the night seemed less oppressive.

They had only taken a few steps in the direction of River Valley Road when Joan said grimly: 'I'm going home. I've had enough for one evening.'

'But it's not even ten o'clock yet!' protested Monty indignantly. 'We can't turn in at this hour, particularly now we've got rid of Romeo. Besides, we're supposed to be showing Matthew the town.'

Matthew announced that he, too, felt he had seen enough for one evening. His spell of giddiness a few moments earlier had left him with a feeling that everything he had witnessed was utterly unreal. But Monty would not hear of another defection. He said to Joan: 'Why don't you take the Pontiac if you aren't going to come with us? We'll take a taxi.'

Presently, Matthew found himself in a taxi with Monty and heading, not for Raffles Hotel which Monty said would be full of stuffed shirts and only open till midnight anyway, but for some more interesting destination which Monty knew of. The taxi was a little yellow Ford 8 with springs that chimed and wheezed at every bump in the road. At the end of Grange Road they came into Orchard Road again, then into Bras Basah Road. Now they were drawing near the sea and a great white building loomed up on the left: Raffles Hotel, Monty said. As they passed the brilliantly lit entrance on the landward side Matthew glimpsed an elderly couple leaving, the man in a black dinner-jacket, the woman in a long glittering evening-dress and stole. Monty chuckled at the crowd of natives who had gathered on Beach Road to watch the Europeans dining on the lawn

beneath the tall pencil palms. ‘That’s the nightly show for the Asiatics. They think white women are whores the way they wear backless evening gowns. They come here every evening and lick their lips.’

At Monty’s direction the taxi turned away from Raffles Hotel along the sea-front. On the right now was the starlit expanse of the *padang* and beyond it, just visible against the sky, the dignified silhouette of the former Grand Hôtel de l’Europe, the benefits of whose dance-floor Matthew had longed in retrospect to transfer to Geneva. The driver evidently knew what was expected of him without having to be told, for their progress had slowed to a crawl and he had half turned in his seat awaiting further instructions. Monty was peering intently at the shadowy figures of women sitting in rickshaws or standing idly in groups of two or three beneath the trees which lined the road. ‘Stop!’ he said, and the taxi drew in to the kerb.

Hardly had they come to a halt when there was a great stirring in the darkness; from what had seemed to be empty rickshaws shadowy figures emerged. Further shapes could be seen shifting in the obscurity beneath the trees; beyond, anchored at sea in the inner roads, were a great number of ships of which only the lights were visible. In a moment, to Matthew’s surprise, the open windows of the taxi were entirely filled with women’s faces, piled one on top of another like coconuts; shortly the windscreen, too, was blocked by the faces of yet more women leaning over the bonnet. A soft murmur filled the air from which an occasional word in English detached itself: ‘OK John!’ … ‘Nice!’ … ‘Back all same flont!’ ‘Whisky soda!’

Meanwhile, the driver, an elderly Malay with a brown face and the white hair of a grandfather, had groped for an electric torch and shone its beam on one window after the other.

‘Can these be real women?’ wondered Matthew as the beam wandered unsteadily over the serried painted masks. Yet on many of these masks the wrinkles stood out despite the paint and powder; the angled light etched them all the more harshly, replacing sunken eyes with a blob of darkness. At the same time, here and there skeletal arms had stretched through the open windows to trail about in the interior of the cab, floating and flickering like sea-weed, plucking weakly at his shirt and trousers, palping his arm or thigh.

‘Hags!’ declared Monty. ‘Drive on!’

The driver raced the engine and the windscreen cleared. One or two other faces showed themselves fleetingly in the places of those that had gone: younger, weaker, more innocent, but no less desperate, trawling unhopefully with this brief glimpse of their younger faces for the twin male lusts which they knew were swimming back and forth like sharks somewhere in the depths of the cab. The hands groped more desperately, pleading, tugging, pinching. Then the taxi moved off in a hail of curses and vociferation. One or two of the women even tried to follow in rickshaws, hoping to catch up at the next traffic lights. But in no time they were left behind.

Monty explained, with the weary condescension of an expert, that certain of these women had their own permanent rickshaw coolies, usually ancient, hollowed-out skeletons of men, excavated by the pursuit of their shattering trade in the Singapore heat, who could no longer compete with younger rivals but might still, now and again, whip their broken limbs into a trot to reach some likely looking prospect with their fair cargoes of flesh … by which he meant, he added with a chuckle, those leathery harridans whose services you could always purchase for a few cents. And they weren’t all Chinese, Malay or Tamil either, by any manner of means. Sometimes you came across Europeans, yes, women who had ‘gone wrong’ in some Eastern city, who had found disgrace through opium or alcohol in Calcutta, Hong Kong or Shanghai … He, Monty, as a student of human nature, took a pretty keen interest in the stories that some of these women could tell you … there were even aristocratic women driven out of Russia in penury by the Revolution. And more recently, as a matter of fact, things had been getting better in Singapore as far as women went. Young Chinese girls had been arriving in droves, refugees from the Sino-Jap war escaping from Shanghai or Canton …

‘Not *better*, Monty!’ cried Matthew indignantly. ‘How can you be so heartless!’

‘Oh, I just meant younger, you know,’ muttered Monty sullenly. ‘No need to get worked up, old boy. After all, it’s not my fault …’

‘But it’s all our faults! It’s disgraceful! This is supposed to be a prosperous country. We send huge profits back to our fat shareholders in England and yet we can’t even provide for a few refugees without them having to go on the streets.’

‘It’s no good taking this high moral line out here in the East, you know. People don’t go in for that sort of thing out here. It’s not our cup of tea. You just have to accept things the way they are. In the Straits it’s every man for himself, if you know what I mean, and it’s as well not to over-do the pious remarks. Personally, and I think I can speak for a lot of chaps who have been out here a while, I don’t care for moralizing, in fact it binds me rigid.’ Monty sounded irritated. The evening’s entertainment, which had started promisingly with the woman fired from the cannon, had proved the dampest of damp squibs. And now, would you believe it? he could hardly say a word without getting a sermon in return.

‘I’m sorry, Monty. I don’t mean to sound prudish. It’s just that I think we have a rotten way of doing things when it comes to anything but making money,’ replied Matthew absently for, of course, Monty could not be blamed for the plight of Chinese refugees on the sea-front in Singapore. But where then did the fault lie? While Matthew mused on this problem the little yellow taxi turned about and headed north again. It rather looked, said Monty gloomily, as if they would have to settle for a massage somewhere.

Among the painted masks which had peered in through the cab's open windows Matthew had noticed one or two younger faces: he remembered one in particular, of a Chinese girl aged perhaps no more than fifteen or sixteen, rather ugly than pretty, but with a pleasant, homely, elfin ugliness like that of a bulldog, if you can imagine a delicately featured bulldog. Supposing that this girl, as seemed likely, was one of the new recruits that Monty had been talking about, he wondered at what precise moment during the past ten years it had become inevitable that she should be uprooted from her village somewhere in South China, or from a slum in Shanghai, and flung down on the streets of Singapore, obliged to sell herself if she could find a buyer? Surely, suggested Matthew to the passive figure of Monty beside him, one must connect this child's desperate face with the long series of failures he himself had witnessed at the League of Nations in Geneva, with the ever-recurring inability of the Great Powers to commit themselves to a world organized on international lines, with the ever-present cynicism of the Foreign Office, and the Quai d'Orsay, and the Wilhelmstrasse where no opportunity was ever missed for showing the diplomats' professional distaste for open diplomacy or for sneering at the idea of a world parliament. What chilled the blood was the thought that this girl's plight and a million other tiny tragedies had been brought about by suave, neatly barbered, Savile Row-suited, genial, polite, cultured and probably even humane men in normal circumstances who would shrink with horror from themselves if they could be made to see their responsibility for what was happening!

Monty's only reply to this suggestion was a grunt or, possibly, a groan. What the point was, in this sort of speculation, he could not for the life of him see. He yawned and smacked his lips. What an evening! First one thing, then another. Well, the only consolation was that this business about which Matthew was getting so steamed up did sometimes produce mouth-watering opportunities. Perhaps he would manage to lay hands on some newly arrived little Chinese piece before the evening was out. It was sometimes on the cards these days, though one had to be lucky.

Encouraged by Monty's grunt of interest in what he had been saying, Matthew went on to explain that his own arrival in Geneva had coincided almost to the day with that fateful explosion beside the South Manchurian Railway in 1931. He had seen it all at first hand, from the first angry denunciations by China's representative, Dr Sze, of massacres by Japanese troops and the reply of Yoshizawa (the same chap who had just recently been in Java demanding oil and minerals from the Dutch) that the troops were merely defending Japan's enormous interests … to what had happened much later: to the devious, hypocritical, perfectly disgraceful support given to the untenable Japanese position by Sir John Simon and the Foreign Office, not to mention the British Press. Only the *Manchester Guardian* had condemned the Japanese and their British supporters.

Monty, peering out at the shadowy streets of Singapore as they fled by on either side of the cab, mumbled that he had been 'in the dark' about all that side of things. He belched dejectedly (perhaps he should not have bolted his fish and chips and beer so greedily at The Great World).

'You see, Monty, so much depended on how the League reacted. It was the first time the Council had had to deal with a quarrel involving a major power and it set the style for everything that has happened since … for everything that will happen, even if one day they manage to revive the League, *for years to come.* Because at that time people all over the world still believed in the League. When the Manchurian crisis broke out it was almost like some medieval tournament. People flocked to Geneva to see the respective delegates do battle. Each side spent vast sums of money, which their countries could ill afford, on propaganda and entertainment to try and win people over to their side. The Chinese took over a luxurious suite on the Quai Wilson, got hold of a French chef and some vintage wines and started giving magnificent dinner-parties.

'Meanwhile, as a sort of counter-attack the Japs staged a colossal reception in the Kursaal at which tons of food and gallons of wine were funnelled into the open mouths of the plump burghers of Geneva as if into Strasbourg geese … In return they made everyone watch a dreary propaganda film which they showed in the empty, echoing opera-house next door (both places had been shut down for the winter) all about the benefits of the South Manchuria Railway Company. Dismal isn't the word. It did no good, anyway, because of the Lytton Report. You know all about that, I expect?'

Hoping to forestall further revelations Monty murmured that, as a matter of fact, he was rather well-informed on that … er … particular subject … er … But Matthew willingly set to work to refresh his memory, just in case. 'This fellow is a serious menace,' thought Monty, glancing at the stout, bespectacled figure of his companion.

What had happened was that the League, this was actually a temporizing device, sent a commission of enquiry composed of a German doctor, a French general, an Italian count and an American Major-General under the chairmanship of Lord Lytton to Manchuria to establish the disputed facts of the matter. It had taken them a year but when they finally published their report, they made no bones about it: Japan was roundly condemned … no doubt to the horror of Sir John Simon and his ilk. They concluded that Manchuria was an integral part of China, that the Japanese action could not be justified as self-defence, that Jap troops should be withdrawn and a genuinely Chinese régime restored. 'That really set the cat among the pigeons, as you can imagine!'

Whether Monty could imagine or not, all he said was: 'This place is usually full of troops at this time of

night. It's funny, there must have been a police raid or something.'

The taxi had come to a halt in a sleazy rubbish-strewn street lined with the usual two-storey shophouses but wider than the streets they had come through. Matthew, still in Geneva, stared out in a daze. Washing, hanging over the street from a forest of poles, tossed and billowed in the light breeze like the banners of an army on the march. Here and there dim electric lights glimmered, emphasizing the darkness rather than shedding light. Monty was speaking.

'Sorry, what's that?'

'I said I thought we might have a beer before going home.'

One moment the street was deserted except for a few shadowy figures playing mah-jong under a street-lamp, the next it suddenly began to fill up; men were scurrying out of doorways, pedalling up on bicycles, galloping towards them in the shafts of rickshaws, even slithering down drainpipes. Nearby a manhole cover where the pavement spanned the storm-drain popped up and men began to pour out of that, too. All these men were converging on one place, the taxi in which Matthew sat in a trance with his thoughts struggling back like refugees from Geneva. He roused himself at last. 'What's all this?'

'They're just looking for customers for their girls,' said Monty who had been paying the taxi-driver. 'Come on, and hold on to your wallet.'

Before they could set foot on the pavement they were surrounded by dim, jostling figures. Words were whispered confidentially into Matthew's ear as he waded after Monty … 'Nice girl' … 'Guarantee virgin' … 'You wantchee try Singapore Glip? More better allsame Shanghai Glip!' ('Do I want to try *what*?' wondered Matthew unable to make head nor tail of this rigmarole.) … 'Oil massage number one!' … Hands flourished grubby visiting-cards. 'You want very nice pleasure!' bayed a giant, bearded Sikh, placing himself menacingly in their path. 'You coming please this way.' But Monty brushed him aside and dived into a lighted doorway beneath a sign reading: 'Dorchester Bed and Breakfast. Very select. All welcome. Servicemen welcome.' Matthew, one hand anxiously gripping his wallet, plunged after Monty. His head was reeling again. 'I must be ill,' he thought giddily as he clambered up a smelly flight of stairs. 'What am I doing here? I should be at home in bed.'

At the top of the stairs an Indian with oiled black hair and a dark, pock-marked face was waiting to greet them. His smile revealed very white teeth among which nestled here and there a glittering gold one; the glitter of his teeth was echoed by the glitter of a row of gold-topped fountain pens and propelling pencils in the breast pocket of his shirt, by the fat gold rings on his fingers, and by the steel watch on his wrist: all this combined to give him a disagreeably metallic appearance. Around his waist he had wound what at first appeared to be a white *sarong*; on closer inspection it proved to be merely a bath towel with the words *Hotel Adelphi Singapore* in blue. Was this his normal attire or had they just surprised him in his bath? For a moment it was hard to be sure.

'Very kind lovely gentlemen,' he said, putting his palms and long, delicate, glittering fingers of both hands together in graceful gesture, 'please coming this way please.'

They were shown into a small, dimly lit room. An elderly and very fat Indian lady, who had evidently been asleep there on the floor, was making a hasty exit and dragging her bedding with her. Monty ordered beers and they sat down, Monty on a bamboo chair, Matthew on a broken-backed couch. The Indian had disappeared down a passage. Matthew stared round the room uneasily. What strange places Monty frequented!

On the wall there were two calendars: one, for 1940, advertised the *Nippon Kisen Kaisha* and showed an enormous ocean liner with Mount Fuji rising improbably out of the mists behind it; the other was for 1939, advertizing Fraser and Neave's soda water: a healthy-looking European girl, whose rather blank, flawless face bore an odd resemblance to Joan's, was holding a tennis racket in one hand and a glass in the other: two men in tennis flannels in the background, very much diminished by perspective, whispered together beneath her outstretched arm and eyed her with interest. Nearby was another picture, this time a photograph torn from a magazine and framed. Matthew gave an exclamation of surprise when he saw who it was: for how often had he not seen that familiar face coming or going in the lobby at the Hôtel Beau Rivage in Geneva! For what hopes and, ultimately, for what despair had its owner not been responsible when he had faced Mussolini over the Abyssinian crisis! With excitement he summoned Monty to join him in gazing at the foxy, handsome features of Anthony Eden.

Monty, however, declined to move. Either he was an *habitué* of the establishment and had already seen the picture, or else he had no particular interest in Anthony Eden; it might be, too, that he feared another discourse on world affairs for he winced visibly as Matthew, reminded of Geneva by the picture of Anthony Eden, suddenly resumed his harangue on the Lytton Report.

'As I was saying, it set the cat among the pigeons, of course it did! The Lytton Report condemned Japan. Result? China could now demand action under Article 16 according to which the other members of the League could be asked to sever trade and financial relations with Japan. This was something that the Big Powers did not want to do: both Von Neurath, for Germany, and the bald baron, whatever his name was, for Italy, made it quite plain in the Assembly debate on the Lytton Report that they wouldn't put up with any positive action. For three days the matter was thrashed out by the whole assembly in one of the larger rooms of the Disarmament Conference Building, where, as I expect you know, another long-running tragedy was playing at

the same time, but among the Big Powers it was our man, I'm afraid, Sir John Simon, who really took the biscuit …'

While Matthew, who had sprung up from the couch again and was striding up and down the room making the floorboards creak, had been discoursing the Indian had reappeared with two bottles of beer with straws in them. He looked unsurprised to find one of his customers striding up and down shouting; odd behaviour was by no means unusual under his roof, but he was inclined to take it philosophically, reflecting that every profession must have its disadvantages. He handed one bottle to Monty and the other to Matthew who took it without noticing.

'Simon, believe it or not, managed to give such a selective interpretation of the Lytton Report that anyone who hadn't read it might have wondered whether it wasn't the Chinese who had invaded Japan instead of vice versa. Not surprisingly, the smaller nations were indignant. Before their very eyes all the fine words and noble undertakings were proving to be gross hypocrisy. "If the League does not succeed in securing peace and justice," the Norwegian delegate declared angrily, "then the whole system by which right was meant to replace might will collapse." And he knew what he was talking about, as it has turned out. One of the Finns then wanted to know if the League was merely a debating club. I don't know if you can imagine, Monty, the shock and anger and disappointment we all felt at the way Simon and our Foreign Office destroyed, with the help of their cronies, what was without doubt the best chance the world had ever had to institute a system of international justice!' Matthew, making a violent gesture with his beer bottle, had caused the liquid inside it to foam out of the neck and spill over his hand. He paused for a moment to brood and lick his knuckles.

In the meantime the door had opened and half a dozen women had been shown in; they went to sit in a glum row on a bench against the wall.

'You picking please woman at your disposition,' said the Indian politely.

Four of the newcomers were middle-aged Chinese women with scarlet cheekbones; two of them started a whispered conversation in Cantonese, a third puffed smoke-rings from green lips, a fourth took out her knitting. The other two women were much younger, mere girls; one was a flat-nosed, round-faced Malay, the other a plain, pallid Chinese with neat pigtails; this latter girl took out a school exercise book and a text book and began to do her Latin homework. Monty looked them over without excitement and belched: the beer seemed unusually gaseous this evening. He was uncomfortable and out of sorts, no doubt about it. He felt, in particular, that there was still another bubble of air lodged distressingly inside him. Would it soon rise to the surface? He waited, surveying himself internally and thinking what a wretched evening he was having.

Suddenly, from some other part of the building through the thin walls there came a drunken Scandinavian voice. 'You say you are a wirgin. I say you are *not* a wirgin!' This was followed by an alarming crash.

'But,' said Matthew, who had taken a gulp of beer and was striding up and down once more (he was sweating copiously and felt by no means sober though he had had little to drink all evening), 'the Report was there and there was nothing they could do about it. That Report had stuck in the gullets of the Great Powers. They could neither swallow it nor spit it out. In fact, the only thing they could think of to do was, of course, what they always did in Geneva when they found themselves at a loss: they formed a committee … this one was to *report on the Report*! Ludicrous! It was called the Committee of Nineteen. It wasted no time in settling down to the stern task of fostering sub-committees of its own in the best Geneva tradition, in particular a sub-committee for conciliation. What a farce! At one time the cynics were saying that they would soon have to have a report on the report on the Report. And yet the Report itself was plain enough. In due course the Committee of Nineteen produced its report on the Report, however. They even went so far as to broadcast it from the League's new wireless station in Geneva. And yet again the Big Powers found themselves with egg on their faces! Japan was plainly condemned. Chinese sovereignty should be restored. Members of the League should not recognize Manchukuo. But ironically enough, at the very moment that Japan was being condemned at Geneva she was preparing to invade Eastern Inner Mongolia as well.'

'I say you are *not a wirgin*!'

'But even so, most likely the Western powers would not even have made the effort they did make to condemn Japan's aggression, had the Japs not attacked Shanghai …'

The young Chinese girl with pigtails, on instructions from the management, had unfastened her bodice, allowing a small lemon-nippled breast to shudder free of its constraining buttons. Meanwhile, its owner pouted over a perplexing sentence she was invited to translate: 'Romulus and Remus, you are surely about to jump over the walls of Rome, are you not?' (Question expecting the answer 'Yes'). What did this mean? Was it gibberish deliberately planned as a snare to the unwary, perhaps designed to make one lose face in some subtle occidental way? Surely it could be nothing else? (But wait! That, too, was a question expecting the answer 'Yes'. She had the feeling that an invisible net had been thrown over her and that an unseen hand was beginning to pull the cords tight.) Well, she could not spend all night trying to penetrate the mysterious workings of the occidental mind so, with a sigh, she passed on to the next question.

'To be frank, Monty, outside Geneva who cared a damn about Manchuria, or a music-hall place called Eastern Inner Mongolia? But Shanghai was different. When the Japs sent in troops from the International Settlement and bombed unarmed civilians in Chapei, people began to realize that Western business interests were threatened. There were limits, after all. But in the end what action did the Big Powers take?'

Again a dreadful crash! This time it was against the very wall of the room in which they were assembled:

the whole building seemed to shake and the framed photograph of Anthony Eden cantered clippety-clop against the wall for a few seconds. 'I give you "wirgin"!' came a hoarse voice accompanied by a woman's cry.

The row of women stared at Matthew with dull eyes. The Indian, disappointed with the effect they were having on his two customers, had encouraged them to unbutton their blouses and undo their skirts or *sarongs* in order to present themselves more advantageously. The young Chinese girl, having finished her Latin as best she could, had turned to arithmetic. Now she was sitting, stark naked, sucking her pencil over a problem which involved the rate at which a tap filled a bath. What, she wondered, was a tap? And what, come to that, was a bath? She would have to consult her aunt who was one of the older women with scarlet cheekbones.

The Indian was hurrying along beside the stout gesticulating figure of Matthew, trying to draw his attention to the enhanced appearance of his girls. The far door opened a crack and the fat Indian lady, his mother, peered in. She was still holding her bedding and anxious to resume her slumbers. He motioned her away crossly.

'Uh … uh … uh …' Monty could feel that bubble of air rising.

'Very young! Soft as rising moon! Or perhaps nice gentleman preferring experience lady with wide knowledge all French and Oriental techniques? Are they, sir, not what doctor ordering?'

'What?'

'Experience lady … wide knowledge …'

Matthew, sweat pouring off his brow in torrents, gripped him by the arm and said, blinking fiercely: 'You may well ask! As a gesture the British, several months too late, declared an arms embargo … but on *both* sides, as if both had been equally guilty. In a couple of weeks it lapsed anyway because the arms manufacturers were big employers and there was a lot of unemployment at the time. So, the Japs had plainly broken the Covenant and got away with it. They left the League, of course, or at least Geneva, the following day. I watched them go myself in a great procession of motor-cars from the Metropole where they'd been staying … There was something horrible about it because it meant the end of everything. I was standing near the Pont de Mont Blanc as they went by on their way to the Gare Cornavin. They went by in silence. Each car that passed was like another support being pulled out from under the League. That was the last we saw of them in Geneva but they left the League in ruins … they and the Big Powers between them. Why? Because this sad defeat of principle at the hands of expediency, this old way of having things settled behind the scenes by degenerate foreign ministries had set a precedent from which we never recovered. Ah, you say that History will find them guilty? Nonsense! History is too muddled and nobody gives a damn about it anyway. Disarmament! Abyssinia! Spain! The same thing was to happen again and again!' Matthew released the Indian and staggering to the couch, sat down with his head in his hands.

Another crash shook the wall and Anthony Eden went clip-pety-clops once more.

'Uh … uh … uh … aaaaaaah!' Monty belched deafeningly. His expression, which had been careworn, brightened a little and he looked with more interest at the row of women. The Indian, however, was already signalling them to be on their way. Evidently they were not what doctor ordering.

Now he approached Matthew with a large leather-bound album of photographs and beckoned Monty to come and have a look, too. These pictures were of his better, high-class girls, he explained. Matthew gazed at them in wonder. The photographer had surprised many of them in intimate moments and some of them had prices pencilled against them, as on a menu. In a few cases there was the instruction: 'Client must ordering in advance' or 'Miss Wu (20 mins.). She weighing one hundred pounds of tropical charm.' Or even 'Miss Shirley Mao (2 pers.)'.

The Indian, seeing Matthew reading with interest, pointed with a grubby finger and said: 'She personally recommending, sir.'

'Are some of these girls refugees from the war in China?' asked Matthew.

The Indian's eyes narrowed as he tried to penetrate the signification of this remark. 'You wanting refugee-girl?' he asked carefully. And he, too, studied the album, wondering which of the girls would best accommodate this special interest. 'I finding Japan-bombing-Chinese-refugee-cripplegirl. Very interesting. You drink beer waiting ten five minutes. I find.'

'Let's go,' said Monty. 'Give the man a dollar for the beer and a couple of dollars for the girls. Otherwise we'll be here all night.'

'You staying, please, nice gentlemen,' cried the Indian. 'No, you going out,' he shouted at his mother who was trying to sneak back in again with her bedding. 'No, you must signing police book,' he howled as Monty made for the door. He produced a grimy ledger. Monty made a quick scribble in it and handed the pencil to Matthew who signed carefully, looking at the list of other signatures.

'Good heavens!' he exclaimed, hastening down the stairs after Monty. 'Did you see whose names were in the Visitors' Book? The Archbishop of Canterbury and Sir Robert Brooke-Popham have both been here tonight!' He paused dizzily to steady himself against the wall. Monty rolled his eyes to heaven and plunged out into the night, saying over his shoulder: 'People don't sign their own names in places like this, you idiot!'

'I say you *are not* a wirgin!' echoed after them into the empty street. A distant crash, a faint cry, and all was quiet. Singapore slept peacefully under the bright, equatorial sky. The shadow of a cat slipped through the street. A child cried. A weary coolie dragged his rickshaw home. An old man sighed in his sleep somewhere. Presently, in two or three hours from now would come the first faint drone of Japanese bombers approaching

from the north-east. But for the moment all was quiet.

26

The taxi-driver (it was still the grandfatherly Malay with white hair who had been driving them earlier in the evening), seeing Matthew stagger as he got out of the cab at the gate of the Mayfair, assumed him to be drunk and asked him if he would like a massage because he knew of a certain place … But Matthew shook his head. He felt weak and dizzy: all he wanted to do was to plunge into bed. He said good night to Monty and set off up the short drive towards the Mayfair Building; with a growl of its engine the taxi was gone, leaving only a deep sigh of relief floating in the empty air where it had been standing. Monty, bound on pleasure, this time did not intend to be thwarted.

'I must have caught some fever,' Matthew thought as he climbed the steps and dragged open the protesting outer door to the verandah. This thought was followed by another, still more distressing: perhaps he had caught the Singapore Grip! Certainly an illness of some kind had taken hold of him. He had half expected to find the Major smoking a cigar on the verandah, but though an electric light was burning, there was no sign of him. Nor was Dupigny anywhere to be seen. So tempting, however, was the prospect of resting his weary body without delay that Matthew allowed himself to be diverted into the nearest rattan armchair, where he lay panting and perspiring while he recovered a little of his strength. Almost immediately his eyelids dropped and he fell into a doze.

But in only a matter of moments he was woken again by the screeching hinges of the outer door. Someone was coming in. He struggled to sit up and look alert but his eyes seemed to have slipped out of focus and for some moments only presented him with a grey blur. Then he found himself face to face with Joan who was saying: 'We saw the light from the road as Jim was on his way home and we thought we'd just call in to say good night.'

'That was nice of you,' said Matthew warmly. Ehrendorf had come in with Joan but was sitting on the arm of a bamboo chair half in the shadows of the door.

'And Jim wanted to have a word with you,' Joan went on.

'If it's about what we were discussing earlier,' said Matthew, aware that his eyes were trying to slip out of focus again, 'about, you know, the colonial question and so forth, well, the point I was trying to make is that we must allow the *whole* country to develop. At the moment what it amounts to is that we only allow the native people to work in agriculture because we insist on selling them our own manufactures. Let me give you an example…'

'No, no, it wasn't about that,' cried Joan hastily. 'Jim will tell you. Go on, you said you would,' she added accusingly while Ehrendorf stirred uneasily on the edge of the circle of light and perhaps contemplated whatever it was that he had had in mind to say to Matthew.

In the meantime another layer of gauze had been removed from Matthew's memory of what had gone on earlier in the evening, so that now at last he began to think: 'What a miracle that they should have made it up after the row they were having an hour or two ago!'

'Go on, you *did say* you would.'

Ehrendorf's pale, handsome face continued to stare mutely at Matthew from out of the semi-darkness and he sighed. A motorcar passed up the road with a deep, chugging sound; the reflected light from its headlights glowed in thin slices through the unrolled blinds of split bamboo. Finally Ehrendorf said: 'I just wanted to say, Matthew, that I expect I shall be leaving Singapore in a day or two … Another posting, I guess you'd call it. Not yet sure where *to*. I realized this evening that Joan and I … Ah, no future in our relationship … Best of friends … Hm, wish each other well, naturally …' He fell silent.

'There,' said Joan.

'What? You're leaving? And I've only just arrived! That really is a shame!' exclaimed Matthew, distressed. Ehrendorf had sunk his head briefly in his hands to give his face a weary polish. 'It's time I was getting home,' he said. But whether he meant to America or to his flat in Singapore it was impossible to say.

For some moments Matthew had been aware that there was something odd about Ehrendorf's appearance. It was this: his uniform clung to him as if it were sopping wet. Indeed, staring more closely at it Matthew saw that it was several shades darker than it should have been and clung to his skin. His hair, too, was plastered down as if a bucket of water had been emptied over him. Moreover, a pool of water had collected round his shoes and was advancing slowly into the circle of light.

'We shall both certainly miss you,' said Joan brightly.

'I guess it's about time I packed my grip and moved on some place else,' said Ehrendorf with a wry, bitter smile.

Matthew, on the point of bringing up the question of Ehrendorf's sodden clothing, was diverted by this last remark into asking if, by the way, either of them happened to know what a Singapore Grip might be, was it a fever of some sort? Ehrendorf seemed taken aback by this question: after a moment's consideration he said he thought it was a suitcase made of rattan, like a Shanghai Basket, as they were called, only smaller. If that was what they were he had one himself. Joan, however, said no. In an authoritative tone she declared it to be a

patent double-bladed hairpin which some women used to curl their hair after they had washed it. This brief excursion into lexicography served to add a further element of confusion to a scene which Matthew had already found sufficiently puzzling. There were questions which must be asked, he felt, to straighten everything out. And he must think of them immediately for Ehrendorf, plucking dejectedly at his wet trousers, was already getting to his feet. He must ask about the pool of water where Ehrendorf had been sitting, and about his departure and Joan and the Singapore Grip. But his eyes chose this critical moment to become a blur through which nothing could be seen, though his mind remained as keen as ever and he heard a voice which reminded him of his own saying a cheery good night to some people who were leaving. Some moments went by while he sat quietly waiting for clear vision to be restored. When it had been, he found himself sitting opposite an empty chair beneath which was a little pool of water. Something else glistened on a rattan table not far away: it was a small handbag of white leather which Joan must have forgotten.

'I must be quite seriously ill and undoubtedly I should call a doctor before it's too late.' But again he closed his eyes and, again, within a few moments, was obliged to open them, this time because he had heard a crunch of gravel and a creak of the wooden steps which led up to the house. The Major, perhaps, or Dupigny returning home, he surmised. They would certainly help him to make contact with a doctor. It was Joan, however, in excellent spirits.

'It's me,' she cried gaily. 'I forgot my handbag. Come for a walk outside. It's lovely. The moon's just rising or perhaps it's the starlight. You can see as clear as day and it's getting cool at last. Come on, stop day-dreaming. You'll be telling me next that you want a "serious talk". But I've had enough "serious talks" for one evening. Well, come on, let's enjoy ourselves.' With that she grasped his hand and pulled him up out of his chair, ignoring his protests and pleas for help. Soon, with his head spinning, he was blundering down the steps beside her. Once in the fresh air, however, he felt a little better and decided that perhaps he was not so ill after all. Joan was right. It was cooler and the heavens were so bright that two shadows accompanied them across the lawn, past the gymnastic equipment, unused since the death of old Mr Webb, the vertical bars, and the high bar like a gibbet with a background of stars, into the denser shadows of the little grove of flowering trees and shrubs which lay between the Mayfair's grounds and the Blacketts' and then on through the dark corridor of pili-nut trees.

'I want to show you something,' Joan said as Matthew shied away from entering this funnel of darkness. Despite his dizziness he was aware that voracious animals might be lurking there and he did not intend to dispense entirely with prudent behaviour. Joan tugged him through the darkness, however, and presently they reached the open space of the lawn with the swimming pool and the house behind it rising white and clear in the moonlight. But instead of heading towards the house, Joan now drew him aside into the blue-black shadow of a 'flame of the forest' tree. There, to his surprise, she slipped into his arms and he felt her lips on his. His arms tightened round her convulsively and the blackness around them became drenched in magenta with the pounding of his blood. He felt her teeth begin to nibble at his lips; her hand found its way inside his shirt and began to travel over his damp skin, leaving a trail of awakened desire wherever it went. He released her to unbutton the top of her cotton dress. But as he did so she slipped away from him laughing, deeper into the shadows.

'Matthew, are you in love with me?' she asked.

'Well, yes,' he muttered, blundering in the direction from which the voice had come. But he found the shadows were empty and again he heard her laughter from where he had just been a moment before; and her voice asked mockingly: 'Are you in love with me, Matthew?'

'Please,' he said. 'Where are you?'

'First you must answer. Are you in love with me?'

'Yes, oh, that is …'

'How much?'

'Well …' Matthew found a handkerchief and mopped his steaming brow. He felt somewhat unwell again.

'Here I am, over by the swimming pool. Come and look at the moon's reflection. That water is so still tonight!'

Matthew left the shadow of the trees and went to where she was sitting on her heels at the edge of the pool gazing down at the bright, motionless disc of the moon stamped like a yellow wax seal on the surface of the water. He attempted to put his arm round her but immediately she drew away, saying that there was something he must do first. She told him but he did not understand what it was.

'What?'

'Yes, you must jump into the water with your clothes on.'

'I must do *what?*' cried Matthew in astonishment. 'Are you joking?'

'No, you must jump in with your clothes on'

'But really …'

'No, that's what I want you to do.'

Matthew said crossly: 'I wouldn't dream of it. I'm going to bed now so … goodnight!'

'Wait Matthew, wait!' pleaded Joan. 'Wait!'

Matthew paused. The edge of the pool was rounded and raised a little, like the rim of a saucer. Joan was now walking along it, arms outstretched like a tight-rope walker. As he watched she allowed herself to lose

her balance and fall backwards into the moon's reflection. There was a great splash and a slapping of water against the sides of the pool. Joan, smiling, lay back against a pillow of water and did one, two, three strokes of a neat overarm backstroke which caused her to surge out into the pool with a bow-wave swirling back on each side of her head. Matthew shook his head in bewilderment, scattering drops of perspiration, as if he himself had just stepped out of the pool. But really, this was the limit! He was invaded by a feeling of unreality. Moreover, the moon and the stars had begun plunging and zooming in the heavens. Any moment now he would collapse if he did not reach his bed and lie down. He plodded back over the moonlit lawn which tilted now this way, now that, like the deck of a ship in a storm, and on through the dark corridor of trees, pausing only to vomit into the shrubbery.

'Wait, I'm coming too,' came Joan's distant voice. 'I still haven't got my handbag.'

But when he had wearily clambered up the steps of the May-fair Building and once more dragged open the creaking door of the verandah he found another surprise waiting for him. So slippery had reality become to his grasp that, for a moment, it seemed to him quite likely that the young woman who came forward, smiling, to greet him, was Joan who had somehow managed to rearrange time and space to her convenience and arrive back there before he did. It was not Joan, however, but the Eurasian girl with dark-red hair whom he had met earlier in the evening at The Great World, Miss Vera Chiang. At the very sight of her the palm of one of his hands began to tingle deliciously.

'You are most surprised, I expect, to see me here, are you not? (You remember, yes, Vera Chiang.) Well let me put things straight for you, Matthew, and then you won't be any longer looking in such a condition. You see, I still have in this house the bedroom which your dear, dear father gave to me when I was "on my uppers". Your father, Matthew, was such a good, kind and generous man. You can be pretty sure I'll always say one for him for the help he gave me … And so here I still have some of my precious bits and pieces, such things like my books (because I always have my "nose in a book") and "snaps" of your dear father with no clothes on and of my family (all now having "kicked the bucket" I'm sorry to say) who were very important in Russia and obliging to leave in Revolution and so this evening, when we were split up by those rowdy sailors, I remembered I must look at them again, which I haven't for some time and I heard you come in and I thought Matthew will also enjoy looking at my "snaps" … There! And, are you all right, dear? You look rather "hot about the collar", I must say.'

Matthew, who was very hot indeed and distinctly unwell despite the pleasant surprise of finding Miss Chiang again so soon, had been obliged to steady himself against a table as the bungalow gave a lurch. After a moment, however, he felt sufficiently recovered to say: 'As a matter of fact, I'm not feeling very well. I seem to having an attack of the Singapore Grip, or whatever it's called.'

It was Miss Chiang's turn to look surprised at this information and she even went a little pink about the cheeks, which made her, thought Matthew, look prettier than ever. For a moment she appeared nonplussed, though. What a pretty girl she is, to be sure, he mused, and what a pity that everything seems so unreal.

'Matthew!' called a voice from outside and in no time there came the by now familiar sound of the door being opened. Joan stopped short when she saw that Matthew was talking to Miss Chiang. She raised her eyebrows and looked far from pleased.

'D'you know Miss Chiang?' Matthew managed to say. 'I think she said she was going to show me some photographs …' he hesitated and eyed Miss Chiang's face carefully: it had occurred to him that she might already have shown him the photographs, in which case what he had said would sound rather odd. Miss Chiang agreed, however, that that was what she had been about to do and Matthew gave an inner sigh of relief.

'Gracious, Miss Blackett, you're all wet! Let me get you a towel.'

'No, thank you, Vera, I shall have dried out in no time. Besides, I find it pleasantly cool.' And Joan slipped into a cane-chair not very far from where Ehrendorf had sat and dripped only a few minutes earlier. As she did so, despite his fever (or perhaps even because of it), Matthew could not help noticing how the thin cotton of her dress stuck to her body, outlining its delicious shape and revealing a number of things about it which he had had no opportunity to notice before. In the meantime, Joan, who still had not quite swallowed her irritation at finding Vera and Matthew together, was asking superciliously whether Vera was pleased with the dress which *she* was wearing. Was it not lucky for Vera, she asked turning to Matthew, seeing that the poor girl was penniless when she came to work for Mr Webb, that *her* cast-off clothing had proved to be a perfect fit?

'Oh, it was terribly lucky for me!' exclaimed Vera, clapping her hands. 'I had never worn such lovely clothes before, Matthew. Except, of course, when I was a baby in Russia, I suppose, because my mother's family was of noble blood, princesses at least … and my father was a wealthy tea-merchant, definitely "well thought of" in the highest circles, so I understand …'

'In our family,' said Joan, 'it has always been our custom to give our cast-off clothes away … My mother always gives hers to the *amah* of to the "boys" for their wives or to someone like that. It seems such a shame to allow good material to go to waste, especially when it turns out to be a perfect fit like the clothing I gave to Vera …'

'Perhaps not *quite* a perfect fit, Miss Blackett,' said Vera sweetly. 'I sometimes think that when I wear this dress it is a little tight across the chest. What is your opinion, Matthew? If I were a little more flat-chested

would it not be an even more perfect fit? But then, even as a young girl, my breasts were rather well-developed. I find I sometimes breathe easier when I open these two top buttons. So!'

And Matthew, though the bungalow had for some time been rocking so badly that it was astonishing the vase of flowers could remain standing on the table, nevertheless snatched a moment to cast a hungry eye on Miss Chiang's exquisite chest, a good deal of which had now come to light as she fanned it, murmuring: 'Ouf! That's better.'

'A funny thing,' said Joan in honeyed tones, 'but my mother says the servants to whom she donates her old clothes are very often not in the least grateful! Would you believe it, Matthew? D'you think it is because they aren't of pure European stock or is it simply a lack of education and good breeding?'

'Well, good gracious!' exclaimed Matthew, gripping the arms of his chair for dear life as he was hurled this way and that. 'I should hardly …'

While Joan had been talking she had been struggling with one hand behind her back, frowning with concentration. Now her expression relaxed and she, too, unbuttoned the front of her dress, though with difficulty because it was wet; having done so she began tugging away a shapeless piece of white cloth, saying: 'I must say, there's nothing more disagreeable than a damp bra.'

'Look, I really must go to bed now,' said Matthew, jumping to his feet. 'I feel dreadfully ill …' The floor had now begun to tilt in different directions at the same time and it was a miracle that he could retain his balance at all.

'But Matthew,' exclaimed Vera, jumping to her feet. 'You must come and look at the "snaps" I have in my room.' And taking his arm she began to lead him from the verandah. But Joan, too, had got to her feet and taking him by the other arm started to drag him in the other direction, saying: 'First Matthew is coming to see something I want to show him outside in the compound … and as it may take a little time, Vera, I think it would be best if you don't bother to wait up.'

'In that case it is better that I take him first to my room,' cried Vera tugging Matthew rather hard in that direction.

How long this embarrassing scene would have continued it was hard to say, but at this moment a torrent of blackness swept over Matthew's storm-battered brain and he sank diplomatically to the floor between the two young women.

'It's no joke being attractive to women, I must say,' he thought as he lost consciousness.

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When Matthew came to he found himself lying on the floor exactly where he had fallen. The Major and Dupigny were kneeling beside him. The two young women had disappeared (Joan to fetch Dr Brownley, Vera to crack ice for a cold compress). The Major and Dupigny, seeing that he was conscious again, helped him to his feet and then supported him to his bedroom, one on each side.

'*Ça a l'air assez grave*,' remarked Dupigny to his friend over Matthew's swaying head. '*C'est la grippe de Singapour si je ne me trompe pas*.'

Matthew, however, felt a little better after a few moments and declared himself able to peel off his own clothes which were as sodden as if he had indeed plunged into the swimming pool. He dried his quaking body with a towel and then crawled under his mosquito net. A pair of wet footprints glistened on the floor where he had been standing. The Major handed him an aspirin and a glass of water; when he had swallowed them he lay back in the darkness, watching giddily as the room began to revolve slowly like a roundabout. Gradually, the bed, too, began to spin, dipping and rising, faster and faster. He had to cling on tightly, as to the neck of a wooden horse, or be hurled out against the walls by centrifugal force. Although the night was still, great gales of hot air poured in through the open shutters and tugged at the mosquito net. Time passed. The light was switched on. Now faces were swirling round the bed: he recognized the Major's anxious features and Dupigny's wrinkled face, pickled in cynicism like a walnut in vinegar, and Dr Brownley chuckling like a fiend, but then Matthew closed his eyes, knowing he must be delirious, and fell into a troubled sleep. In his dreams he was back in Geneva … the pale, sorrowful ghost of Matsuoka appeared and whispered: 'Matthew, why do you persecute me like this? You know I am only trying to do what is best.' And then he smiled and his face turned into that of a cobra. Outside in the darkness some small creature uttered a cry as it was killed by a snake.

Now, a few miles away at Katong, Sir Robert Brooke-Popham also lay dreaming of the Japanese. Brooke-Popham slept on his back, legs apart, arms away from his body, wrists and palms turned upwards, an attitude of total surrender to sleep, perhaps, or that of a man felled suddenly in the boxing-ring by an unexpected blow. His honest, friendly face looked older now that sleep had allowed the muscles of his jaw to sag, older than his age indeed for he was not much over sixty; but this long Sunday had been spent in interminable conferences and he was exhausted. Moreover, these conferences still had not resolved the problem which faced him. Should he order troops across the border into Siam in order to forestall a possible Japanese landing there?

Malaya, very roughly, was carrot-shaped with Singapore at its tip and Siam, more roughly still, providing

its plume of green leaves. The obvious place to defend Malaya's northern border with Siam was where the green plume grew out of the carrot, at the thinnest part, for there you would need least troops to do the job. Alas, there was a snag to this, because the border, although it obligingly started at the thinnest part on the western side of the carrot, instead of heading straight to the east to snip off the leaves neatly where they should be snipped off, wandered south for some distance into the pink flesh of the carrot itself at its fattest. Nor was the problem simply that Malaya's real border, by wandering hither and yon through the bulging part of the peninsula, was a good deal longer than it need have been: the fact was that there were only two roads south into Malaya through the jungle and mountains and both of them *began* some fifty miles across the border into Siam, one at a place called Singora, the other at Patani.

So what was he going to do? (Or, to put it another way, what should he have *already done?*) Should he order the 11th Division to invade Siam and occupy Singora before the Japanese could land? There was hardly still time to do so, anyway. Ah, but he did not know (although he might suspect) that the Japanese were even thinking of landing there. This was a terrible dilemma for a man who was not as young as he used to be. After all, one rash act might plunge Britain into war with Siam and her patron, Japan, when by abstaining it might be avoided. This was the fix which Brooke-Popham had found himself in. During the past week the Chiefs of Staff in London had authorized him to go ahead and launch his forestalling operation (which had been named Matador) into Siam if he thought a Japanese landing there was imminent. Well!

Nor was it only a question of occupying Singora. There was the other road, too, the one which began at Patani and ran south-west towards the Malayan border. To hold this road would also mean pushing into Siam, though it should not be necessary to occupy Patani itself. This time the idea was to seize the only defensible position on the road, at a place called 'the Ledge', where it entered the mountains near the border. The Ledge was vital, Brooke-Popham was in no doubt about that. If you did not stop an attacking force at the Ledge there was no knowing where you would stop it. Most likely you would have to take to your heels and try to halt it again some miles down the road at Kroh. But once the enemy (still hypothetical, thank goodness!) had reached Kroh they would have crossed Malaya's mountainous spine and reached the civilized and vulnerable western coast with its open rice fields and rubber plantations. And once there you would no longer have the jungle to inhibit their flanking operations. Somehow you would have to bottle them up, for if they once got loose in all that open country, well, it would be better not to think of what might happen … ! He and General Percival, whose responsibilities began on the Malayan side of the border, had agreed therefore, that they should have a battalion waiting at Kroh, ready to sprint up the road into Siam and grab the Ledge: they might have some Siamese border guards to deal with on the way but that should not worry them. So everything was ready as far as the Ledge was concerned, more or less, though the troops could have done with more training, raw recruits as many of them were. Brooke-Popham knew, even in his sleep, what had to be done. What he did not know, and could not decide, was when, if ever, to do it. After all, by acting too soon he could start an international incident! And if he did that he would really look a fool. Because, frankly, that is the sort of thing that people remember about a chap, not all the hard work he has got through in his career.

Brooke-Popham lay pole-axed on his bed. Occasionally he gibbered a little or champed his moustache briefly with his lower lip. Although he was asleep his mind still bore the traces of the day's dilemma, printed on it like crisp footprints in the snow: the problems that faced him went on rehearsing themselves even when his conscious mind had been ordered to stand easy. If only he had known earlier what the Japanese were doing! (Mind you, he still did not know *for sure*, for absolute sure.) For the past week the sky over the South China Sea had been thickly carpeted with cloud, making air reconnaissance impossible. But then, late on Saturday morning, one of the RAF Hudsons, on the point of turning for home, had come across a break in the cloud over the sea some distance to the south of the tip of Indo-China. And there below had been first one Japanese convoy with three troopships, then another with twenty, both with an escort of warships. What he and his staff had found difficult to determine was where they were going. The first convoy was heading north-west into the Gulf of Siam, the second due west: therefore, the most likely explanation was that they were innocently rounding the tip of Indo-China from Saigon on their way to Bangkok. So more Hudsons and a Catalina flying-boat had been sent out to look for them where they *should* have been, in the Gulf of Siam. The Catalina had failed to return: nothing more had been heard of it. As for the Hudsons, that providential break in the cloud had sealed itself up again and they had seen no more, merely that endless fluffy carpet, white on top, grey below, stretching from one horizon to the other. Somewhere beneath that carpet were two sinister little herds of Japanese troopships, but where? They had cudgelled their brains all Saturday night to find the answer.

What was to be done? Last night he would have given a great deal to be able to ask General Percival and Admiral Phillips what they thought. But Percival was in Kuala Lumpur visiting 111 Corps and Tom Phillips was in Manila. Moreover, with one's own staff one must be careful to display confidence and an air of decision; the important thing is to give the impression that you know what you are doing, even when in doubt: any commander will tell you that. But what a burden it had been that he had had to carry by himself! He remembered a cartoon he had seen in some magazine, making fun of the excesses of German discipline. A platoon of storm-troopers were marching over a cliff while their officer was trying to decide what order to give next. An NCO was pleading with him: 'Say *something*, even if it's only goodbye!' Brooke-Popham had chuckled heartily when he had seen that cartoon. But in the last few terrible hours it had returned to haunt

him and he had been unable to get it out of his head. Say *something*, even if it's only goodbye!

The hours of Sunday had ticked away slowly until, at long last, at about the time when the first *pahits* of the evening were being sipped all around him in peaceful, unsuspecting Singapore, the Hudsons, skimming the wave tops, had found the troopships again. All his worst fears had been immediately realized: the troopships were on course for Singora and a mere hundred miles away. Others were steaming down the coast in the same direction. A Hudson had been fired on by a destroyer.

Brooke-Popham champed his moustache again and uttered a long, low sigh, aware that in a few minutes he would have to drag himself back to full consciousness to find out what was happening. The sighting of those troopships approaching Singora had meant another round of exhausting conferences. Percival had come back on the train from KL, displaying surprise that he had not begun 'Matador' and ordered the 11th Division into Siam yesterday when the troopships had first been sighted. But it was all very well for Percival, he did not have the wider responsibilities! Any fool could see that the political implications of 'Matador' could not be shrugged off lightly. Had he not just had a telegram from Crosby in Bangkok warning him against alienating the Siamese by violating their neutrality? As Commander-in-Chief Far East he was obliged to consider all sides of the matter.

While Matthew and the others had been at The Great World more exhausting conferences were taking place, and yet more after supper. By now Tom Phillips had returned from Manila. Percival asserted that 'Matador' should be abandoned as General Heath and 11th Division would no longer have time to reach Singora before the Japanese landed. Well, in a way this had come as something of a relief: it meant that, whatever else might happen, he would not involve his country in a diplomatic incident. Still, 'Matador' had been a good idea strategically and he was reluctant to abandon it altogether. It might still come in useful, though in what way, precisely, he could not quite say. So, before retiring to rest in the early hours, he had ordered that word should be sent to Heath to keep the 'Matador' troops standing by. He had noticed one or two raised eyebrows at this (what was the point, his staff might have been wondering, in keeping troops standing by for an operation which it was too late to execute?) and a ghostly voice had whispered in his ear: 'Say *something*, even if it's only goodbye!'

And yet … and yet, perhaps he should have ignored Percival and ordered 'Matador' to go ahead and hang the consequences. Which was the greater risk, to start a military engagement at a disadvantage or to risk making an enemy of a potential ally? And what had happened to the poor devils in that Catalina which had gone out yesterday? A typewriter was clattering faintly two, three rooms away. Soon it would be dawn and he would have more decisions to wrestle with; he must sleep, if only for a while. Perhaps they were even now floating somewhere in the warm, sluggish waters of the Gulf of Siam, hoping against hope for rescue. He felt old and tired: he, too, was floating in warm, sluggish waters, hopelessly, hopelessly. Life had been better when he was still Governor of Kenya: he had not felt so worn out there; the drier climate had suited him better than this humid heat. Well, he had retired once and now here he was back again in harness. Ah, but life had been best of all in France in 1914, the good fellowship and the sunlight and the smell of the country. What fun he had had with their liaison officer, Prince Murat, when the mayor of Saponay was making a fuss about Royal Flying Corps men stealing fruit from orchards: Murat had told the poor mayor that he would have him court-martialled and shot! That had quietened him down. And then there was another time at some little country restaurant near Fère-en-Tardenbois with Murat and Baring, yes, eating outside in the sunlight surrounded by roses and pear trees … how golden the Montrachet had sparkled in their glasses! And the time Hillaire Belloc had visited them from England and the boxer, Carpentier, a colleague in the French naval air force; he remembered how Trenchard (he was a General in those days) had thrown his cigar into a carppond at some place, perhaps a monastery, where they were having lunch, and a carp had eaten it and for a while seemed to have poisoned itself but afterwards to everyone's delight staged a recovery. But above all there came to him now, as he lay troubled and sweating on his bed at Katong, the smell of cider echoing back over quarter of a century from that long, sunlit autumn of 1914, and the memory of Avros and Blériots and Farmans as they came grumbling through the translucent evening, one by one, towards the stubble of the aerodrome. Now the first ground-mist was beginning to form while the shadows reached out across the field and the Mess bell sang its clear note into the still air, calling them all to supper. Brooke-Popham sighed again in the darkness. Outside the window the breeze gently tossed the palms of Katong, making them creak and rustle. Beside him the menacing shadow of the telephone crouched like a toad in the gloom.

General Percival, too, had stretched out to snatch a little rest. And he also slept with his mouth open, snoring slightly from time to time. Were those his teeth in a glass by his bedside? No, his teeth, though they protruded, were perfectly sound: it was just a glass of water in case he should wake during the night and feel thirsty. Beside it glimmered the luminous dial of his watch. What time is it? Half past two, perhaps. It is difficult to make sense of those glowing, trembling dots and bars in the darkness. He was dreaming, partly of the defence of Malaya, partly of the Governor, Sir Shenton Thomas. Someone was whispering to the Governor that he, Percival, was not senior enough to take command in Malaya. Who is this sinister whisperer dripping poison into the Governor's ear? Percival can see the man's hands, knotted and heavily veined, emerging from the sleeves of a uniform, but the face remains in shadow. It must be someone who had known him when he was out here before in Singapore, in 1937, on General Dobbie's staff … General Dobbie, there was a man for you! Over six feet tall, broad-shouldered, and with the quiet confidence of a man who has the gift of Faith.

You had only to look into those steady blue eyes and to witness that calm, informal manner to know that Dobbie would support you through thick and thin. And yet the whispering continued: that face in the shadows was telling the Governor that Percival would be a nuisance, that he did not know how to handle civilians. But this was not true! He did know how to deal with civilians. It is just that one must be careful with them. With civilians it is all a question of morale, of what goes on in their minds. He had seen that in Ireland as a youngster. And civilians *get things wrong*! They take fright, like one of those herds of antelope dashing this way and that on the African plain. And no army on earth can save them once they start this blind dashing about. A snore back-fired and almost woke him, causing his sleep to stall like a cold engine, but somehow he managed to keep it going, and presently the rhythm picked up again and he slept on, breathing deeply.

At his bungalow opposite the Mayfair the Major, reclining in a cane chair in his pyjamas, had managed to doze off too, and was dreaming of Ireland twenty years ago and of a woman who might have been his. He woke up and cleared his throat despondently. How sad it all was! But no doubt everything had been for the best. He dozed again. Perhaps in sleep the past could be rearranged and things turn out better.

On one of the upper floors of Government House Sir Shenton Thomas slept uneasily, his handsome face unstirring, however, on the pillow. His difficulties were not near the surface of his sleeping mind but he was dimly aware of them, nevertheless, fluttering and darting shadows like sparrows in a leafy thicket. He got on well with the Asiatics, so it was not that … They liked and respected him. No, of all his preoccupations the most disturbing was that in these troubled times unless he remained alert he might not be able to prevent the dignity of his office from being eroded. Duff Cooper and the Military watched the powers he held as Governor the way greedy schoolboys might watch a pie cooling on the window-sill. He did not mind for himself, he was not a selfish man, but for the Colonial Service and for his successors. And for the natives, too, lest they should be abused. Beside him the telephone dozed peacefully in its cradle. In a few minutes it would awaken and begin to shriek.

Not everyone was asleep, however. In the Operations Room at Sime Road a considerable amount of excitement was developing. When Sinclair had come on duty (at one a.m., not midnight as he had told Monty) he had found a discussion taking place between the GSO2 and the Brigadier General Staff as to whether the code-word ‘Black-Out’ should be sent out. The BGS, however, had declared that this was the Governor’s responsibility. Not long afterwards the ‘green line’ telephone had suddenly started to ring. Sinclair, beside himself with excitement, had watched the RAF officer on duty pick it up. It was the aerodrome at Kota Bahru on the north-east coast near the Siamese border. Suspicious shipping had been detected standing off the coast. Pulford, the Air Officer Commanding, had been summoned. GHQ Far East had been contacted and asked to identify these ships because it looked as if they could only be … Sinclair shuddered with the effort of maintaining an impassive appearance as he worked rapidly to assist the GSO2 in the preparation of the Situation Report. He was going to be present at the beginning of war in the Far East, he was certain of it!

Nor was General Gordon Bennett, the commander of the Australian Imperial Force in Malaya, asleep. As a matter of fact, he was not even in Singapore but hundreds of miles away in Rangoon. He had been obliged to stop there on his way to Malaya from Egypt where he had been visiting the Australian troops in the Middle East. Now, while waiting for an aircraft to convey him to Singapore, he was spending the night at the splendid old Strand Hotel beside the Rangoon River. Instead of sleeping, however, he was sitting in the dark beside the open window of his room, gazing out surreptitiously into the sweltering night towards the window of another room and holding his breath with excitement.

On account of the heat the window of this room, too, stood open and a light was burning there despite the lateness of the hour. Thanks to the angle of the building Gordon Bennett could see into it across the intervening courtyard. And what could he see in that room but four men who he was pretty certain were Japanese busy poring over maps which he was convinced were maps of Malaya. Japanese spies! What else could they be? He had already telephoned Military Headquarters in Rangoon and told them, guardedly at first, that he had uncovered a nest of spies. Then, since they did not appear very interested, he had had to make it explicit. Jap spies hard at it, spinning their toils practically under his nose! But although the blockheads in charge had told him, soothingly, that they would see about it, he had been watching for hours and they had still done nothing. Meanwhile, he had been staring so long and so fixedly at that nest of spies that he was finding it difficult to keep his eyes focused on them. He ground his teeth in frustration. Why didn’t the police come? This heat was quite unbearable. Every now and then he was obliged to close his aching eyes. So the night wore on, the spies scheming, Gordon Bennett grinding his teeth.

Back in Singapore the Major had opened his eyes to find himself still in his cane chair with a burned-out cigar between his fingers. He must have dozed off for a moment. What time could it be? Presently he would go across the road to see whether Matthew’s fever was any worse. He yawned. His limbs were stiff. He wondered whether all the claret he had left in Berry Brothers’ cellars was surviving the Blitz. How wasteful and senseless was the destruction of war! He had hoped to have finished with all that in 1918. And the twins! Where were they under the bombing? Safely evacuated now, thank heaven. He had had a letter from Northumberland a couple of days ago. Wearing sensible shoes and lisle stockings, each with her brood of unruly, unnerving children (*his* god-children). It was just as well, too, since (husbands away at the war) they had taken to dancing with Free Frenchmen. He must write tomorrow, no later, and tell them not to flirt with the farmhands, not that he had much confidence that they would do as they were told. ‘There’ll be a lot to

sort out, one way or another, when this one is over.' More to the point, was his Château Margaux and Château Laffitte surviving? It should be almost ready to drink by the time he got home. He had not meant to stay out in the East so long. And Sarah, where was she under the bombs? Married somewhere, no doubt. Oh well, perhaps it was all for the best in the long run. And Sarah? He dozed again. How sad it all was! Sarah … The Major dozed despondently.

Not far away, in bedrooms looking out over the placid gleaming skin of the swimming pool Monty and Joan lay on their beds and slept. Joan was visited in her dreams by Matthew, but a slim, handsome, graceful, authoritative Matthew with a thin moustache and without spectacles; together, wealthy, powerful and admired for their good looks, they reigned in contentment over the Straits. As for Monty,' in his dreams you might expect to find naked women jostling each other for the best position under the eye of his subconsciousness; surprisingly this was not the case. Instead, a young boy with a pure, loving face came to see him. He had known this boy at school, though he had never spoken to him. He had left school suddenly when his father had died and had never returned. Now, though, he at last came back, filling Monty's sleeping mind with a piercing tenderness; no doubt everyone carries such an image of purity and love without limit, hidden perhaps by the dross of tainted circumstances and the limits of living from one day to the next, but still capable of ringing through one's dreams like the chime of a bell on a frosty morning. It was this chime which the conscious Monty, fated to toil in sexual salt-mines throughout his waking hours, now faintly heard from an unexpected direction.

Who else? Walter and his wife sleep side by side, rather touchingly holding hands: it is too hot to get any closer than that. Walter's bristles lie smooth and sleek against his spine: he is at peace. He sleeps a calm and confident sleep, very black, and when he wakes he will not remember having had any dreams. Only deep down in the foundations of his sleep are there one or two disturbing shapes which slip or slither (the problem of palm-oil for instance crouches blackly in the blackness and watches him with blazing eyes) but nothing that would seriously disturb that towering, restful edifice. But it's all very well for Walter to sleep peacefully. He is used to the Straits, has spent most of his life here. It is not so easy for the soldiers scattered about the island in clammy tents or snoring barracks. The Indian troops sleep best, the heat is nothing to them, but what about the British and even the Australians? The whirrings and pipings that issue from the jungle close at hand are enough to make a bloke's hair stand on end, particularly if he has only been in the tropics for a week, and in the army itself for not much longer.

Somewhere in the dark waters far to the north, a certain Private Kikuchi (a nephew of Bugler Kikuchi who, as every Japanese schoolboy knows, died heroically for the Emperor not long ago in the war in China) waits tensely in the troopship bringing him closer to Kota Bahru and the north-eastern shores of Malaya. He has just finished reading a pamphlet called 'Read This Alone — And the War Can Be Won'. This work, issued to himself and his comrades on board, explains in simple terms how in the Far East a hundred million Asians have been tyrannized by a mere three hundred thousand whites sucking their blood to maintain themselves in luxury, the natives in misery. Private Kikuchi has read with drumming pulse how it is the Emperor's will that the races of the East shall combine under Japan's leadership for peace and independence from white oppression. In addition he has read about numerous other matters: about how to avoid sea-sickness in various ways, by keeping a high morale, by practising the Respiration Method, by use of bicarbonate and Jintan pills, and by willpower. He has learned how to cherish his weapons, what to eat, to treat natives with consideration but caution, remembering that they all suffer from venereal diseases, how to mount machine-guns in the bow of the landing-craft and to plunge without hesitation into the water when ordered. If he discovers a dangerous snake he knows he must kill it and then swallow its liver raw as there is no better tonic for strengthening the body. He knows that when it is very hot he must bind a cloth round his forehead beneath his steel helmet to prevent sweat from running into his eyes. He knows, too, that in the jungle he should avoid highly coloured, strongly scented or very sweet fruit. He must avoid fruit that are unusually beautiful in shape or with beautifully coloured leaves. Nor must he eat mangoes at the same time as drinking goat's milk or spirits. These and a thousand other useful things he has learned, but now, just for a moment, the motion of the ship gives him a queer sensation. And yet… No! Fixing his mind on Uncle Kikuchi's glorious example he wills himself to feel normal for the Emperor.

Now a young Malay fisherman, dozing on the poles and planks of his fishing trap out in the sound off Pulau Ubin, suddenly wakes and hears a faint but steadily increasing drone from the north-east. He has heard aeroplanes before but this time they are coming in a great number. What an ominous noise they make when they fly all together like a flock of birds! But aeroplanes are the business of the white men: their comings and goings are nothing to him. His job is merely to catch fish: he wonders whether the fish in the swirling black water can hear this dreadful pulsing as it swells overhead.

When the bombs fall, as they will in a few moments, it will not be on the soldiers in their tents or barracks, who might in some measure be prepared to consider them as part of their duties, nor even on black-dreaming Walter whose tremendous commercial struggles over the past decade have at least played some tiny part in building up the pressures whose sudden bursting-out is to be symbolized by a few tons of high explosive released over a sleeping city, but on Chinatown where a few luckless families or individuals, floated this way by fate across the South China Sea, sucked in by the vortex of British capital invested in Malaya, are now to be eclipsed.

The starlight glints on the silver wings of the Japanese bombers, slipping through the clear skies like fish through a sluice-gate. They make their way in over Changi Point towards the neatly arranged beads and necklaces of streetlights, which agitated and recently awakened authorities are at last and in vain trying to have extinguished. In a dark space between two necklaces of light lies a tenement divided into tiny cubicles, each of which contains a number of huddled figures sleeping on the floor. Many of the cubicles possess neither window nor water supply (it will take high explosive, in the end, to loosen the grip of tuberculosis and malaria on them). In one cubicle, not much bigger than a large wardrobe, an elderly Chinese wharf-coolie lies awake beside a window covered with wirenetting. Beside him, close to his head, is the shrine for the worship of his ancestors with bunches of red and white candles strung together by their wicks. It was here beside him that his wife died and sometimes, in the early hours, she returns to be with him for a little while. But tonight she has not come and so, presently, he slips out of his cubicle and down the stairs, stepping over sleeping forms, to visit the privy outside. As he returns, stepping into the looming shadow of the tenement, there is a white flash and the darkness drains like a liquid out of everything he can see. The building seems to hang over him for a moment and then slowly dissolves, engulfing him. Later, when official estimates are made of this first raid on Singapore (sixty-one killed, one hundred and thirty-three injured), there will be no mention of this old man for the simple reason that he, in common with so many others, has left no trace of ever having existed either in this part of the world or in any other.

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The suburb of Tanglin where Matthew continued to thrash and sweat in the grip of his fever lay some distance from Chinatown and Raffles Place. The noise of bombs exploding over there on the far side of the river was not quite loud enough, therefore, to wake heavy sleepers like Walter and Monty. It was not until morning that they learned the astonishing news: Singapore had been bombed, Malaya had been invaded! Nor was that all, for the Japanese had simultaneously attacked the Americans, too, demolishing their fleet at Pearl Harbor. America was in the war at last. A strange elation took hold of the European community.

The United States suddenly became popular. The Stars and Stripes sprouted beside the Union Jack in the shop windows along Orchard Road. American citizens who had been ignored or even jeered for their country's neutrality found themselves welcome everywhere and were bought drinks whenever they showed themselves in the street or Club. Joan even considered revising her opinion of Ehrendorf, despite the tiring scenes which had led up to what she jokingly described to Monty as 'Ehrendorf's Farewell'. ('The lovesick glances he kept ladling over me like tepid soup!') Perhaps, carried along on the tide of goodwill, if Joan or Monty had happened to bump into Ehrendorf they would at least have bought the blighter a drink. But he did not put in an appearance anywhere. No doubt he was busy with his superiors, putting finishing touches to plans for obliterating the yellow aggressors.

Later in the morning Walter strolled the few yards from his office on Collyer Quay to have a look at the damage to Robinson's in Raffles Place. Around the corner barriers had been set up to keep back sightseers, but Walter showed his official pass and was allowed through. Broken glass and silk underwear from Gian Singh's window in Battery Road still lay on the pavement; part of Guthrie's had been reduced to a pile of rubble across the road. Walter surveyed with equanimity this devastation of one of his principal rival's buildings. Nevertheless he offered his sympathy to a Guthrie's man he saw standing nearby, and feebly tried to prevent himself thinking: 'It's an ill wind …' His blue eyes glittered cheerfully in the sunlight as he watched the cautious efforts being made to search for unexploded bombs and to clear the rubble. Later, however, when he had returned to his office once more, a more sober mood took hold of him and he thought: 'This is a fine thing to happen in our jubilee year!' Moreover, this unexpected attack by the Japanese could prove troublesome to Blackett and Webb's commercial interests.

Forewarned of centralized buying by the Americans, Walter in a short space of time had committed himself to a great deal of forward business in order to escape the limitations of the new arrangements. He had been obliged to acquire rubber in substantial quantities from other producers as well as from the estates managed by Blackett and Webb in order to fill these contracts. Not that, under the Restriction Scheme, it had been enough to get his hands on the rubber: it had also been necessary to buy *the right to sell it.* Under Restriction each rubber producer, whether estate or smallholding, had been allotted a share of Malaya's total exports. Each producer's share, naturally, was less than his capacity to produce: that was the point of the Scheme. Even with light tapping, heavy replanting and recent high rates of release to the world market, there was still no shortage of rubber (inside Malaya, that is). Rubber was plentiful, the right to sell it was scarce.

Fortunately, however, export rights could be bought from Asiatic smallholders who, for one reason or another, were not using them to sell their own rubber. Smallholders were issued with coupons which were equivalent to their share of Malaya's export rights: these coupons had to accompany any rubber they intended to sell. However, many of the smallholders were illiterate, or simply baffled by the bureaucratic intricacies of the system. Others were swindled out of their coupons by unscrupulous clerks at the Land Offices which issued them or, believing them to be of no value, gave them away to Chinese or Chettyar pimps who lay in wait outside. Some even believed that these perplexing pieces of paper represented a new government tax and therefore willingly surrendered them to entrepreneurs who magnanimously undertook to pay on their behalf in return for some favour. A number of smallholders gave up tapping their trees and simply sold their coupons instead of rubber. Walter, in any event, had found it possible to enlarge the export quota of Blackett and Webb's estates to cover the considerable stocks of extra rubber he had accumulated. Blackett and Webb's godowns in Singapore on this first day of the war in the Far East were crammed with rubber destined for America and fit to burst.

Walter, at first, had been delighted by his success in arranging contracts which would evade the Americans' new centralized buying. He had secured this business at prices which none of his competitors would be able to match. This was surely a coup to rival those of Mr Webb's early days in Rangoon! It made him feel young again; it reminded him that business was an adventure. How angry old Solomon Langfield must have been when he heard of these deals which Walter had closed in the nick of time. It would have been obvious to old Langfield that Walter had been tipped the wink in advance. How bitterly he must have remonstrated with Langfield and Bowser's board of dimwits for not having got wind of it! Walter thought with satisfaction of their fat, complacent Secretary, W. J. Bowser-Barrington, trembling before the old man's anger. Every *stengah* they drank for a month must have tasted of bile. Ha! He had vowed to give Langfields and the rest something

to remember Blackett and Webb's jubilee by … and he had done so.

All the same, even at the height of his satisfaction with this state of affairs he had not been able entirely to conceal from himself certain misgivings about the sheer quantity of rubber he had awaiting shipment to various American ports. These misgivings had increased steadily week by week as shipping became more difficult to find. This morning, with the American Pacific fleet knocked out of action, or at best disabled, the prospects were that merchant shipping would become even more scarce. Hence, the chances of realizing Blackett and Webb's considerable investment in the rubber-crammed godowns on the wharfs in the near future had also diminished. Walter was not seriously worried yet. But he was beginning to wonder whether he might not have been a little too clever. Besides, there was another aspect of the matter on which he now began to brood and to which had not given sufficient attention earlier.

Walter, you might argue, must have always known he was taking a risk, given the ominous way in which the Far Eastern political climate had been developing for some time past. He must have known that there was a possibility that he might be left holding a great deal of rubber which he was unable to deliver to the buyers. But a businessman must sometimes take a risk, particularly if he hopes to make profits on a grand scale. So what is all the fuss about? Walter will get rid of his rubber sooner or later, particularly now that America is in the war. If instead of making his grand profit the risk causes his plans to go astray, it will not be the end of the world for Blackett and Webb, merely a nuisance and a dead weight that must be carried for a while. Well, the aspect of the matter on which Walter had begun to brood (not that it was easy to brood on anything in the hectic atmosphere of that Monday morning, and with the sudden vulnerability of Blackett and Webb's Shanghai and Hong Kong interests demanding instant attention) was this: although certainly a considerable risk was embodied in those rubber-crammed godowns, there was no chance of making a grand profit, nor had there ever been. Blackett and Webb, being British-registered, were subject to the one hundred per cent excess profits tax introduced in the summer of 1940. The most that could be made on Walter's risky initiative was 'a standard profit'. He had known this all along but had ignored it, dazzled by the prospect of an old-fashioned coup to celebrate his jubilee year. This was the first time in years that he had committed an error of judgement of this magnitude. It was clear that the prospective reward should have been on the same scale as the risk.

'Well, it may still turn out all right,' Walter told himself with an effort and, shrugging off this depressing line of thought, turned to the more urgent matters awaiting his attention.

'We have good reason to be proud of the RAF. In aircraft and efficiency it is second to none in the world!'

These words, echoing beneath the high ceiling of an upstairs room in the Singapore Cricket Club were sucked into the blur of the fan revolving above and scattered on the breeze to every corner. Half a dozen members of the Citizens' Committee for Civil Defence, of which the Major was founder, chairman, secretary, treasurer and most active participant, stirred and murmured: 'Hear! hear!' These members, and others not present, had been summoned to attend an emergency meeting of the Committee. Of the other members, three were absent without explanation (either they had not been successfully contacted, or were ill, or were dead … death being a not uncommon reason for non-attendance, given the great age of most of the Committee members), three more were temporarily away in Malacca and Kuala Lumpur, another had not come on principle because he was having a feud with the Major: he was indignant at having been urged on a previous occasion to abbreviate his harangues to the Committee. There remained two other members whom the Major officially considered to be present although, in fact, they had been lost in the bar downstairs where they were performing the useful function of toasting the American entry into the war.

The Major, slumped in his chair at the head of the long table, did not join in the approval of the RAF; indeed, his eyebrows gathered into a gloomy frown. Although as loyal to the Forces as the next man, he had come to dread these patriotic remarks. He had found that even on a good day they badly clogged the proceedings of the Committee. On a bad day the wheels would not move at all. Besides, the Major reflected that he was surely not the only person in Singapore to wonder why the RAF had not managed to shoot down or drive off the Japanese bombers last night.

'The attempts to set fire to London from the air persistently carried out in the raids from 1915 to 1917 resulted in failure,' declared the speaker, an octogenarian planter called Mr Bridges, in a quavering voice. *'Why?'* He lifted his bespectacled eyes from the paper he held and glared round the table at his colleagues: this, however, was a mistake because he then had to find his place again, which took some time. The Major stirred restlessly and looked at his watch.

'Why? Because of the low efficiency of the incendiary bombs then used, the poor marksmanship of the enemy and the brilliantly effective fire-fighting services.' Again Mr Bridges was unable to resist looking up from the paper in his trembling hand and glaring at his audience over his spectacles. This glare did not mean that Mr Bridges was aroused: it was purely rhetorical, part of the old chap's habitual oratory learned in youth from some forceful speaker and displayed year after year before the boards of the various tin mines and rubber companies on which he had served. 'Let me say, gentlemen, that for courage and ability I doubt if there is a finer body of men than the London Fire Brigade.'

Once more his audience stirred and muttered: 'Hear! hear!' with the exception of the Major who ground his

teeth and scratched his bare knee which had just been bitten by some insect.

'Out of 354 incendiary bombs on London only eight caused fatal casualties. The maximum number that fell during one raid was 258 and these were distributed over a wide area averaging seven bombs per square mile …'

'Seven bombs per square mile! Where on earth has the old blighter got all this from?' wondered the Major knocking out his pipe into an ashtray which had been filled with water to prevent the ash being blown about by the fan overhead. He stifled a yawn. Lunch, combined with Mr Bridges' statistics, had made him drowsy. It was hot here, too, despite the generous dimensions of the room. How he loved the tropical Victorian architecture of the Cricket Club with its vast rooms, high ceilings and ornamented balconies! Behind his chair a segment of the green *padang* could be seen through the window which was angled to face, not the Eurasian Club at the far end of the ground, but the Esplanade and the sea. In the small area of the field that was visible from where he sat a little group of Tamil groundsmen were peacefully at work moving the practice nets a few feet seawards to a fresh patch of turf. No doubt cricket would continue despite the bombing; important matches could not be expected to wait until the Japanese had been dealt with. While the Major was trying to recall whether the annual Civil Service and Law versus the Rest (Gentlemen *v*. Players some cynic had called it) had yet taken place, there came unbidden to his mind the recollection of a girl being shot at a cricket match in College Park, oh, years ago. He had read about it in the *Irish Times*: a young woman of twenty or so who had been watching the Gentlemen of Ireland playing the Army. Some Sinn Feiner had fired a revolver through the park railings and taken to his heels; the bullet, aimed at one of the Army officers, had struck her on the temple. She had been engaged to be married, too, if he recalled correctly; an innocent young girl killed by a scampering fanatic in a cloth cap. This recollection, echoing back over two decades, still had the power to numb the Major with indignation and despair. The uselessness of it!

'The total number of casualties in England from aerial attack during the Great War was 1,414 killed and 3,416 wounded … Material damage costing three million pounds was produced by 643 aircraft dropping 8,776 bombs which weighed a total of 270 tons!'

This paroxysm of statistics was delivered with such vigour that it caused someone inopportunely to murmur: 'Hear! hear!' but the Major, profiting from the fact that Mr Bridges had once again glared round the table and lost his place, seized his chance.

'We're all grateful, I'm sure, to Mr Bridges who has spared no effort of research into the last war. The point he is trying to make, I believe, is that a great gulf exists between the bombing methods of then and now … What we must decide is how best to combat by our civil defence procedure the *modern* methods of which we had a sample in the early hours of this morning. And in any case …'

But here he was obliged to stop for Mr Bridges had now succeeded in hunting down his lost place and capturing it on the page with a long ivory fingernail: this permitted him to display indignation at the Major's interruption. He still had a great deal to say! He still had to delve into the question of the Zeppelin raids on London in 1915 and 1916! The question he wanted to consider was whether the amount of damage caused varied according to the amount of cloud cover. 'For example, on 31 May 1915, a fine moonlit night, Zeppelin LZ 38 dropped eighty-seven incendiary bombs and twenty-five explosive bombs, killing seven people, injuring thirty-two, and starting forty-one fires which caused £18,396 worth of damage *whereas* …'

This information was greeted by a groan. It came, however, not from one of the Committee members, whose minds had wandered in a herd to other pastures, but from behind the Major's chair, to the leg of which a black and white spotted dog was tethered. This animal, a Dalmatian, did not belong to the Major but had been borrowed for a demonstration which was to take place later in the afternoon. The poor dog undoubtedly was bored, hot and restless. The Major, who was suffering similarly, without turning reached a sympathetic hand behind his chair to caress the animal's damp muzzle. An unseen tongue licked his open palm.

But the Major did not want to hurt the old man's feelings: he had clearly put in a lot of work on his Zeppelins. Alarmed by Dupigny's sombre predictions of a Japanese advance to the south the Major had formed the Committee some weeks earlier with the idea of putting pressure on the arrogant, inert administration of the Colony to do something about civil defence. A gathering of influential citizens was what he had had in mind, but in the event he had only been able to conscript a handful of retired planters and businessmen, one or two Chinese merchants who agreed with everything but kept their own counsel and an argumentative young man from the Indian Protection Agency who disagreed with everything and, fortunately, seldom put in an appearance: at the moment he was several *stengahs* the worse for wear in the bar downstairs.

The truth was, and even now listening to Mr Bridges (the Zeppelins had moved off, giving place to some curious information about the angle at which bombs dropped from various heights arrived on the earth) the Major was reluctant to face it, they were making no headway. At best the Committee provided a weekly airing for a number of elderly gentlemen who otherwise would not get out of their bungalows very often. The Major himself had been responsible for such positive initiatives as had been taken. At his own expense he had put advertisements in the *Straits Times* and *Tribune* calling for assistance from the general public. The response had been disappointing.

A Chinese company had tried to sell him a stirrup-pump, 'approved by ARP Singapore and now on show at ARP headquarters, Old Supreme Court Building, Singapore'. There had also been a long, mysteriously defensive letter from the sales manager of a firm manufacturing a patent rake-and-shovel for scooping up

blazing incendiary bombs. It was *not true*, declared this letter, as had been stated 'in certain quarters' that, when tested, the incendiary bomb had burned a hole in the shovel. In most conditions this would not occur. It was the opinion of the sales manager that the people testing the shovel had used the wrong kind of incendiary bomb.

The other two replies had also had a commercial flavour, embroidering prettily on the initials ARP. One of them, addressed to Mrs Brenda Archer, urged him to Appear Rosy and Pretty under all conditions. 'War is horrible but preserve your composure and don't look terrible. Keep your colour by using Evelyn Astrova Face Powder.' Finally, a printed circular in a similar vein suggested that 'A Reassuring Packet of what is now a very popular brand, Gold Bird (Ceylon) Tea, will soothe and refresh you in your worried moments.' To sell people things, reflected the Major, is all very well, nothing in the least wrong with it (does nothing but good when you come to think of it and one might even say, as Walter did, that but for commerce Singapore would hardly have existed at all), but this commercial spirit needed to be leavened by patriotism and an interest in the community as a whole. For if Malaya were nothing more than a vast congeries of competing self-interests what chance would it have against a homogeneous nation like Japan?

Of course, there were patriots here, too, and in plenty. At this very moment Mr Bridges had paused again to pay tribute to 'the brave lads in khaki who had come from the four corners of the Earth to defend Malaya'. ('Hear! hear!') The trouble was that for the British this patriotism was operating at long distance: their real concern was not for Malaya but for a country several thousand miles away. As for the Indians and Chinese, the great majority of them felt more loyalty to their communities in India and China than to Malaya: they had, after all, simply come here to find work, not to die for the place. Moreover, Malaya's population, already divided by race and religion, was even further divided by differing political beliefs. Walter Blackett, the Major knew, was concerned by the existence of clandestine Communist groups in his enormous labour force. Where the Government was concerned, anxiety about the allegiance of the Chinese and of their various 'national salvation' organizations was chronic.

A few weeks earlier the Major had been summoned by some official to the Chinese Protectorate on Havelock Road and shown a list of patriotic Chinese associations believed to be under Communist control. But, he had wanted to know, what had these alarming associations to do with his own gentlemanly Civil Defence Committee, which was never likely to cross the path, at least he hoped not, of, for example, the 'Youth Blood and Iron Traitor-Exterminating Corps'? Blinking rapidly the official had replied that, in his 'humble opinion', the Malayan Communist Party would choose just such an innocent organization as the Major's for its subversive manoeuvres. The Major should know that Communists behaved in a society, particularly in a Chinese society, the way hookworm larvae behave in the human body, boring their way from one organ to another.

Startled by this image, the Major had looked at the official more closely: he was a bald young man with glasses, sweating profusely; in the draught of the fan thin wisps of hair flickered about his ears like sparks of electricity. He had said his name was Smith. The Major wondered whether this could be the same Smith who, Walter had told him, had incurred the wrath of old Mr Webb one day in Walter's office. The Major could not quite remember what it had been about…something to do with Miss Chiang, though. Perhaps he had made some disparaging remark about her, or about the Chinese generally, and Mr Webb had taken umbrage.

Yes, the young man had continued, they ignored what one considered to be the natural boundaries of the separate organs, passing through the skin into the blood-stream, migrating from the pulmonary capillaries into the air sacs, into the alveoli and bronchioles and thence, as adolescent worms, into the intestines where, developing a temporary mouth capsule, they attached themselves to the wall to suck blood, pumping it through their own horrible guts. And from time to time they would abandon the old site, which they had sucked dry … ('*dry*, Major, d'you understand, *dry* …') … and attach themselves to a new and more nourishing location.

'Steady on!' the Major had exclaimed, taken aback. 'These blessed worms don't have anything to do with civil defence. Nor with Communists, for that matter.'

'No, they don't,' agreed Smith calmly, but with the tufts of hair still flickering around his ears in a disturbing sort of way. 'Speaking of worms I'm trying to make you aware of how these men…and women, too, Major, I believe you are friendly with a certain Miss Vera Chiang, are you not? Yes? I thought so … of how they pass from one organ to another in our society. Did you know that Stalin has recommended infiltration of Nationalist movements in his *Problems of Leninism*? Ah, I see you did not! Did you know that the Comintern had opened a Far Eastern Bureau in Shanghai, Major, not to mention the Sun Yat-sen University and the University of the Toilers of the East in Moscow? Perhaps some of your so innocent Chinese friends are graduates, Major, had you thought of that? Did you know that in 1925 the head of the Comintern, Zinoviev, declared that the road to world revolution lies through the East rather than the West … at a time, mind you, when the Chinese Communists and the Kuomintang were still working hand in glove? What more natural, when Chiang Kai-shek turned on his Communist friends in 1927 and destroyed their power, than that they should seek other and more innocent organizations such as yours to *worm* their way into? That is why I speak of worms, Major! You lack experience in such matters. You'd do much better to leave civil defence to the proper authority.'

'If we had thought the Government was competent we wouldn't have considered it necessary to form the

Committee in the first place!' the Major had retorted sharply, nettled by the young man's tone.

As it had turned out, he now reflected sadly, dropping a hand to soothe the Dalmatian again, for all the progress that had been made he might as well have taken Smith's advice. He had been faced at every turn by total indifference. But what, after all, could one expect of a society whose only culture and reason for existence was commercial self-interest? A society without traditions, without common beliefs or language, a melting-pot, certainly, but one in which the ingredients had failed to melt: what could one expect of such a place?

The Major now saw an opportunity for interrupting Mr Bridges again, and this time more successfully, by suggesting that the time had come for questions. From behind his chair there came a long, warbling howl of despair. The Major added swiftly that since there were no questions they would adjourn until the following week and, in the meantime, he would continue to press the administration for air-raid shelters in the populous quarters of the city and a proper distribution of gasmasks among the Asiatic communities. With that, he got to his feet, released the dog, and with a hasty goodbye made for the door. The emergency meeting had not been a success.

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A clock somewhere was striking five o'clock as the Major's Lagonda turned to the right off Orchard Road on its way to the Tanglin Club. A few moments later the Major, followed by the dog, was making his way up the steps to the entrance. Here he unexpectedly came upon Dupigny, clad in billowing tennis flannels which the Major had no difficulty in recognizing as his own; moreover, it was the Major's old school tie which had been knotted around Dupigny's waist to serve as a belt. The Major's old school, Sandhall's, was not a famous establishment but the Major was attached to it, none the less, and it caused him a moment's distress to see his school colours wrapped like a boa-constrictor around a Frenchman's waist. But still, one must not make a fuss about trifles. This was war.

The Major continued to look preoccupied, though about something else, as he climbed the steps with the black and white dog trotting behind him, its tail waving back and forth like a metronome. At the top he paused and said: 'Well, François, do we have to fear the Communists in Singapore?'

'Until you have a government popular and democratical in Malaya, yes, you must fear them,' replied Dupigny after a moment's reflection. 'Your Government here fears, naturally, an anti-colonial revolution if the Communists are allowed to operate freely. It is true, there is a risk. Thus, your dilemma can be stated so: *with* them in danger … *without* them, too weak to resist the Japanese!'

'Oh, François!' The Major shook his head and sighed but did not pursue the matter. Instead he asked Dupigny if he had heard any further news of the Japanese attack. According to the communiqué issued that morning by GHQ the Japanese had tried to land at Kota Bahru in the extreme north-east of the country but had been driven off. But in the meantime Dupigny had spoken to someone who had attended another briefing: the few Japanese left on the beach were being heavily machine-gunned, he told the Major.

'First we repel them. Then, though we have repelled them, they are on the beach and we are machine-gunning them!'

The Major shrugged and turned away, but continued to stand there for a moment, fingering his moustache gloomily. Dupigny surmised that he was exploring the worrying possibility of the Colony being attacked not only from the sea and the sky but also, as it were, being eaten away from within by a Communist Fifth Column. Beside him, sitting up straight, the dog looked worried, too, though no doubt only because his friend the Major was looking worried.

The predicament of the British in Malaya, mused Dupigny not without satisfaction, for like any good Frenchman he had suffered from the superior airs the British had given themselves since the fall of France, was strikingly similar in many ways to that which he himself and Catroux, his Governor-General, had had to face in Indo-China. How were they to make twenty-five million natives loyal to France and impermeable to enemy propaganda? Catroux, remembering that Lyautey, faced with the same problem in Morocco during the Great War, had solved it by practising what he had called *'la politique du sourire'*, had resolved to do the same. Like Lyautey he had made it a rule that no one in authority should show the least sign of distress no matter how adversely the war might seem to be going. And so, Dupigny recalled smiling ruefully, their policy in Indo-China for the first few months of the war had been a display of nonchalance. Now, here in Singapore, the British had evidently decided on similar tactics to judge by their first cheerful communiqués.

Having invited Dupigny to attend the lecture he would presently deliver on 'ARP and Pets', the Major passed on his way leaving Dupigny to wait for his partner in the Club tennis competition: this was Mrs Blackett's brother, Captain Charlie Tyrrell. Dupigny had decided for his own self-respect and for the prestige of France to win this competition, come what might. He had already discovered, however, that his partner was a serious impediment to this ambition. Charlie had been retained temporarily in Singapore to replace a staff officer who had gone sick. Alas, Dupigny had been deceived by Charlie's athletic appearance into choosing him to share the spoils of victory. Not only had Charlie proved to be a highly erratic tennis-player, the man could scarcely even be depended upon to put in an appearance when a match had been arranged.

Only grim efforts on Dupigny's part had allowed them to reach the third round. Now their opponents, two polite young Englishmen, were already waiting for them on one of the courts.

But presently Charlie arrived, looking flustered and clutching an impressive armful of tennis rackets. 'I say, I'm not late, am I?' he asked apprehensively. He was alarmed and dismayed by Dupigny's determination to win the competition, which seemed to him, at best, peculiar, at worst, deranged. And the further they advanced the more gravely unbalanced, it seemed to him, grew Dupigny's behaviour. Needless to say, he now regretted ever having agreed to become the fellow's partner. But with any luck they would be soundly beaten by the two sporting young men whom he could see waiting for them on a distant court beyond the swimming pool. On closer inspection their opponents both proved to have very blue eyes and hair glistening neatly with hair-oil. One of them stirred as they approached and called 'Rough or smooth?', spinning his racket on the red clay.

Dupigny was equal to this. 'Ah, you mean, as we say in French, *"Pile ou face"*? he said swiftly. *'Alors, pile!* Ah, *pile* it is,' he added, picking up the fallen racket and inspecting it. He showed it to the young Englishman. They glanced at each other but said nothing.

But today even Dupigny, reminded of Indo-China by the Major, found it hard to concentrate on the game, determined though he was to win it. He recalled how, when Catroux had been appointed Governor-General in 1939, he had taken the train from Hanoi to meet him in Saigon. The day after their return to Hanoi war had been declared with Germany.

'Mine! No, yours!' Dupigny shouted as a tennis ball hurtled down on them out of the steamy sky. 'Ah, well placed, sir!' he added as Charlie executed a perfect smash between their two opponents. Charlie's form today verged on the miraculous.

They were winning comfortably but Dupigny was overpowered by a sudden feeling of discouragement. He and Catroux had got on well together. Together, with one or two trivial adjustments to the course which events had taken, they might have brought off a splendid coup! They might have succeeded in detaching Indo-China from Vichy and have struck off on their own. Now, instead of standing here in a British colony in borrowed tennis flannels (ludicrously too long so that one of the Major's ties, which he had selected for its disagreeably clashing colours with the idea of unsettling their opponents, encircled his body not round his waist but just below the armpits) he and Catroux might have been navigating an autonomous country like some great vessel into a new era.

Indo-China, self-supporting in food, was not a difficult country to administer, as Catroux had been pleased to discover. All their difficulties, indeed, had stemmed in one way or another from their confused and fitful contacts with metropolitan France. From time to time baffling instructions would reach them from one ministry or another. Supplies in vast quantities, they were instructed, were to be sent to France under the general mobilization scheme. As a result he and Catroux had presently found themselves presiding over great quantities of rice, maize, rubber, coffee and other commodities, rotting on the quays at Haiphong and Saigon for want of shipping.

And so it had continued throughout the *drôle de guerre*. Their contact with ministries in Paris had grown increasingly spasmodic. Urgent cables for instructions would be met by dead silence. But then suddenly, out of this silence, would crackle some insane command. The Ministère des Colonies, for example, in order to meet some whim of the European coffee markets, had abruptly ordered them to increase the area of the country under coffee. Catroux had had to point out that coffee would only start producing at the end of the fourth year of growth … and so, once again, the Ministry had lapsed into silence until, presently, there had come some other eccentric command … and another, and another. But by then it had become clear to both Catroux and Dupigny that, because of the lack of shipping to Europe and the need to trade instead with China, Japan and Malaya, the country in their charge was growing autonomous with every passing day.

Meanwhile, as to what might be going on in Europe nobody had bothered to inform them. Dupigny had two memories of that stifling early summer in Hanoi: one was of sitting with Catroux in the Governor-General's palace. There, beneath the Sèvres bust of 'Marianne' on the mantelpiece, they had discussed the long official telegram containing news of the German offensive and of Gamelin's counter-manoeuvre in Belgium: they had realized that unless there was a quick French victory in Europe their own position in Indo-China would be made precarious by the threat from Japan. Dupigny's other memory was of the arrival of a second telegram, after four weeks of total silence, announcing that a request for an armistice had been made to the Germans.

'Mine! No, yours! No, mine!' howled Dupigny as their opponents once more lobbed high into the hot evening sky. But Charlie, ignoring these instructions, continued to crouch like a toad with his head in the air and a fixed expression on his face, precisely where the ball was about to return to earth. Dupigny knew better than to trust Charlie with that fixed look in his eyes posing gracefully beneath the ball. So, thrusting him aside he managed to usurp his place and scramble the ball back over the net with the wooden part of his racket. The two young Englishmen, who had already retreated to the back of the court in expectation of Charlie's smash, hammered their legs with their rackets and looked tense.

Yes, all was going well … at least on the tennis court. Back in Hanoi, however, their position had become hopeless once France had fallen. Nevertheless, for two desperate weeks he and Catroux had not for a moment stopped looking for support. They had cabled Washington seeking American help, in vain. They had made a last appeal to Bordeaux (whither the Government had retreated) begging that war materials should be sent to

Indo-China rather than handed over to the enemy. This had produced no result either. In the end everything had depended on Decoux, Admiral of the Far Eastern Fleet at Saigon. Decoux, who was not subject to the Governor-General's authority, had been wavering as to whether he should order his fleet to fight on with the British or submit to orders from defeated France. At first he had seemed inclined to reject the armistice, sending a signal to Admiral Darlan in France to the effect that the universal feeling in Indo-China was for continuing the struggle with the help of the British. Darlan's cunning response was an offer to make Decoux Governor-General in place of Catroux.

And so to Saigon where a last-resort conference had been arranged with the British represented by Admiral Sir Percy Noble, an old acquaintance of Decoux's. The whole of Saigon, Dupigny recalled, had been simmering with excitement and patriotism. On the Rue Catinat every shop and café displayed French and British flags interlaced. Fervent crowds of *anciens combattants* held meetings to protest their loyalty or gathered in front of the British Consulate on the Quai de la Belgique. On the way to the quays for the conference on board his flag-ship, the *Lamotte-Picquet*, Decoux had shown signs of weakening in his determination to resist, hinting darkly that secret meetings were being held in Saigon at which 'extreme solutions' were envisaged. He had been approached by certain hot-headed young officers who wanted to join Noble in Singapore. Very soon it had been evident that, despite his protestations of friendship for the British, Decoux would not resist Darlan's tempting offer. Catroux, even with the promised support of the Army and of the French community would clearly be unable to retain control of Indo-China against both Decoux and the Japanese.

During the conference with Noble they had discussed the possibility of defending Indo-China in case of attack by the Japanese, but that was out of the question. How could they possibly resist the two hundred modern Japanese planes on Hainan Island with the handful of obsolete aircraft at their disposal? The British were too weak themselves to send reinforcements. At the dinner to mark the end of the conference there had been an air of disillusion and hostility beneath the formal politeness: when Decoux proposed a toast to *Le Président de la République* there was a moment of hesitation, then Admiral Noble declared that because of the armistice he could not drink to the President but would simply drink to *La France.* Decoux had turned pale but said nothing.

Two days later, at a formal leave-taking on the quay, another moment of bitterness had occurred. In the full hearing of the officers standing around, Admiral Noble had remarked grimly: 'As a friend, Decoux, I advise you not to stay on board the *Lamotte-Picquet* in future. If she were on her way back to Europe we might have to sink her and I should prefer to know that you were not on board.' With that, he had turned away to board the British cruiser *Kanimbla* leaving Decoux, angry and shaken, standing on the quay in the sunshine. Thus had the French Far Eastern Fleet been lost to the Allies.

A year and a half later Dupigny found himself standing on a tennis court in the sweltering Singapore evening, watching a dense cloud of tiny birds swirling against the dying blaze of the sky. Their two opponents, overcome without difficulty, had trailed away to the changing-rooms with a baffled air and one or two backward glances at Dupigny, who struck them as decidedly odd. Charlie had followed them to stand them a drink at the bar. Dupigny, still brooding, drifted after them. Now the Major's voice, floating down from the open deck-like structure above, reminded him of the ARP lecture. Feeling his years, he climbed the flight of outside stairs to where the Major, with his spotted dog slumbering at his side, was addressing a handful of people, mainly women. Out here, Dupigny had been told, dances and cinema-shows were sometimes held when the weather was considered too hot to use the ballroom inside the building. Dupigny himself never attended dances, seeing no interest whatsoever in grasping an adult woman and trotting with her fully clothed in the tropical evening.

'It is most important that your animals should remain calm … A box of five-grain potassium bromide tablets from any chemist … one tablet for a cat or small dog, such as a Pekinese, two for a terrier, three for a spaniel …'

Stranded in an alien culture, surrounded by British dog-lovers, Dupigny suffered an acute pang of nostalgia for the pre-war days in Hanoi, or better still, Saigon … How pleasant to be sitting now as the light was beginning to fade on the *terrasse* of the Hotel Continental, drinking beer and watching the evening crowds swirling round the corner of the Rue Catinat towards the Boulevard Bonnard, the women so graceful in their slit tunics and flowing black silk trousers! Or to wander through the great flower market set up in the Boulevard Charner on the eve of Tet. Later, having eaten at one of the excellent restaurants in the city he might move on to take coffee at the Café Parisien in the Rue de l'Avalanche or, even better, at the Café du Théâtre from where he could look out across the square and listen to the night breeze in the tamarinds.

'Gas masks are not suitable for animals …' (Was this a joke? No, the Major was serious. He looked discomfited by the chuckles of his audience) … 'but instead you can put them in a box with a hole covered in wire netting and a blanket soaked in a solution of bicarbonate of soda, four pounds to the gallon of water, or permanganate of potash …' The spotted dog at the Major's feet stirred and looked up enquiringly for it had heard the Major's talk many times before and had come to recognize the moment when its services would be required.

Ah, Dupigny's nostalgia became deliciously acute as he remembered Saigon mornings, walking in a vast airy room, treading the waxed tiles of the Continental's long corridors which had a special, indefinable smell of France about them, on the way to a quiet inner courtyard to a breakfast of coffee and croissants and small,

succulent strawberries from Dalat, sitting there in the open air surrounded by flowering shrubs. Later in the morning, perhaps in the company of Turner-Smith, a friend from the British Consulate and a pederast of refinement, he would make his way up the Rue Catinat past the looming red-brick Basilica de Notre-Dame. At the corner of the Rue Chasseloup-Laubat he and Turner-Smith would part company, the latter to take up his station outside the boys' Collège, while he himself would find a vantage point near the gates of the girls' school, the Lycée Marie-Curie: he had done this so often while on leave from Hanoi that the sly little creatures had come to recognize him and had even (one of them had confessed in a gale of childish laughter) given him a nickname … Monsieur Marie-Curie!

Yes, at any moment now it would be noon and the gates would open to release a flood of beautiful young girls, their bodies so lithe and graceful in their school uniforms, their skins so smooth, their black eyes sparkling with mischief. Why, he mused, his nostalgia bordering on ecstasy, if homosexuality was *le vice anglais* the Frenchman's great temptation was *le ballet rose*! Of all the pleasures which he missed here in dull British Singapore he missed none so much as the *ballets roses* which an indulgent madame of Saigon would organize for his distraction from the cares of office. The British, *hélas*, would never understand. How, for instance, could he begin to explain such a joy to the Major?

The Major was concluding his address with the advice that his audience should get their animals used to seeing them in their gas-masks. 'The point is,' he explained, fumbling with his own gas-mask case, 'that your dog may get frightened when he sees you wearing one and your voice, which means so much to him, will sound completely different. Let me show you what I mean.' The Major, with the skill of long practice, drew on his gas-mask, transforming his mild face into that of a monster with round glass windows for eyes and a snout like that of a pig. He turned to the spotted dog beside him and the dog, recognizing its cue, barked loudly three times and then, pleased with its performance, wagged its tail. The Major's talk was over; now they could both go home and have supper.

Dupigny, exiled among the British, uttered a sigh and longed to go home, too.

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> HOUSEHOLDERS: No lights showing seaward or upward. Remove bulbs so that your servants cannot put on a light you have considered unnecessary.
> MOTORISTS: Headlights and sidelights have got to be darkened. It is the beam that is the danger. A sheet of brown paper entirely covering the whole headlight glass with a double thickness on the top half kills the beam and upward glare but gives a reasonable light on an unlit road. Wind down window before leaving car to prevent glass fragments in a blast.

Now darkness had fallen on Singapore, this first evening of the war in the Far East. While it was still daylight the coming of war had remained difficult to grasp, at least for those who had not been living or working near where the bombs had fallen. Even those who, like Walter, had looked at the roped-off bomb damage in Raffles Place and Battery Road had found it hard to see the rubble as being in any way different from some civilian catastrophe, the exploding of a gas main, say, or one of Chinatown's periodic tenement conflagrations. But this evening when it grew dark, it grew very dark indeed. The dimming of street lights, the motor-cars creeping along with masked headlights, the blacked-out shops and bungalows and tenements and street stalls (not perfectly blacked-out, admittedly, because in that sweltering climate windows must be kept open, but still a shocking extinction of light and life) … all this came as an unpleasant surprise to the city's population, reminding them that History had once more switched its points; this time most abruptly, to send them careering along a track which curved away into a frightening darkness, beyond which lay their destination.

But if the first evening of the war was bad, the second was even worse. The first had been a novelty, at least. People were excited by the prospect of another air-raid. They thought of the Blitz and felt that they were participating at last, that unusual demands were being made on them. But when it grew dark again on the second evening it gradually became clear that this new way of life was not a passing fancy: it had come to stay for as long as it liked and when it would end nobody could say. Walter, who had arrived at Government House in daylight and normality for a conference with the Governor's staff and the Colonial Secretary on the subject of new freight priorities to take effect on the other side of the Causeway, experienced the darkness as a physical shock when his Bentley crept away down the drive once more and out into the shrouded city. Moreover, he was disturbed by what he had just heard for, just as he was on the point of leaving, the Governor, who had not himself taken part in the conference, had asked to see him for a moment.

Walter was no longer as frequent a visitor to Government House as he once had been. In his younger days he had been on more friendly terms with the Governor of the time than he now was with Sir Shenton and Lady Thomas. It was not that he found Sir Shenton Thomas more formal than his predecessors: if anything, it was the reverse. Walter had felt more at ease when the *man* was masked by the dignity and ceremony of the office. Walter and his wife had often been invited to formal dinners at Government House in days gone by. It had not seemed to him in the least unsuitable that the guests on such occasions should be assembled in a

respectful herd while waiting for the Governor and his wife to make an entrance; nor that, when the entrance was made and an aide announced 'His Excellency the Officer Administering the Government …', a regimental band should strike up the National Anthem on the verandah a few yards away. This was exactly what Walter required in a Governor. It did not even seem to him ridiculous, though he would have had to admit that it was ridiculous if you had taxed him with it, that the Governor and his wife, who were followed by a private secretary in a tail-coat with gilt buttons and blue facings, should be presented by the latter to the assembled guests as if they had never met before, although in fact they knew each other quite well. Walter had simply felt that it was *right* to proceed, as they had proceeded, in strict precedence, the Governor having given his arm to one of the ladies, across the marble hall (which he was now treading accompanied only by a secretary) to *The Roast Beef of Old England.* It was the way things *should* be done, because that way it did not matter who the Governor was. He wore his office like a uniform. And he could not give himself airs any more than a uniform could. So Walter thought, glancing for reassurance at the statue of Queen Victoria presented by her Chinese subjects which stood at the end of the hall. That, at any rate, was still unchanged.

He had expected to find the Governor in his office; instead, the secretary led him up the main staircase to the first-floor reception rooms. There he found Sir Shenton standing beside his wife, the pair of them oddly silent, motionless and disaffected in this vast room scattered with crimson sofas and gilt chairs. The room, indeed, was so large that it seemed to dwarf the two small figures. Walter found himself thinking of two weary travellers stranded without explanation in a deserted railway station. They stirred at the sight of Walter's squat, energetic figure and appeared to revive a little.

There was something about the Governor's good looks, or about his voice, or perhaps just about his manner which made Walter feel ill at ease. He was faintly conscious of an effort to make him feel inferior, the slightly patronizing air of the diplomat to the businessman. Or was he just imagining it? Did he have a chip on his shoulder? No doubt it *was* just imagination. Nevertheless, the bristles along his spine began to puff up involuntarily as he advanced, and he thought: 'Who does the *real* work, the work that pays the wages of stuffed shirts like this chump!' Sir Shenton asked him whether he would like a drink and, when he asked for a beer, set off wearily towards a table against one of the distant walls to pour it himself. 'Where on earth are the "boys"?' Walter asked himself, amazed by this lack of circumstance. Meanwhile, he exchanged a few words with Lady Thomas who was enquiring politely after Sylvia and Joan (Walter stared at her suspiciously with his bulging blue eyes, examining her for traces of condescension and trying to make out what she *really* might be thinking) and saying that the Blacketts really must come over one of these days … 'once everything is back to normal,' she added, smiling bravely. When her husband, looking more exhausted than ever, had trudged back again from a distant part of the room, she said goodbye graciously to Walter and withdrew, leaving the two men alone together. Walter peered with suppressed irritation at the Governor's handsome features; the blighter looked tired, certainly, but his manner was as urbane as ever. He explained that he had been up most of the night, that he would not keep Walter long, that…

At this point he appeared to get stuck, for he paused, his eyes vaguely on Walter's chin, for a considerable time, until even Walter, who was by no means ready to let himself be outstared by this powdered, pomaded, well-tailored but otherwise nugatory symbol of His Majesty's authority in a foreign land, began to grow uneasy. But just as he was about to clear his throat to remind the Governor of his presence he started up again of his own accord, at the same time putting an end to his long contemplation of Walter's chin … That, he continued, looking Walter now straight in the eye, he wanted Walter's opinion on how the native communities would respond to 'the current situation' if the Japanese effectively established themselves on the peninsula … 'as they look like doing', he added sombrely. He knew, he went on, that Walter kept a close eye on his work force and for that reason had felt that his opinion … the opinion not of an office-bound administrator but of a man in daily contact with the people of Malaya … would be of particular value.

Walter, by no means sure that this reference to his qualifications as an adviser was not subtly but slightingly intended, followed with a suspicious eye the distinguished figure of the Governor as he retreated a few steps to perch with a weary, languid air on the arm of a chair. Extending a neatly creased trouser leg which terminated in a brilliantly polished shoe, Sir Shenton began to move it back and forth in a very deliberate imitation of a casual manner. However, Walter was obliged to give his attention to the Governor's question which was precisely that which he himself had not ceased to ponder ever since he had learned of Sunday night's air-raid.

'Not to mince matters, sir,' he replied, 'I would expect apathy towards both us and the Japanese until it becomes clear that either one side or the other is likely to get the upper hand. A possible exception, and one in our favour in most cases if not all, would be the politically-minded Chinese. Fortunately, the Japanese are even less popular with them than we are, thanks to their war in China. But as you know, discontent among the Chinese and even the Indians has been increasing steadily over the past four or five years, to judge by strikes …'

'Then you take a pessimistic view? Did you read this?'

Walter took the paper which the Governor handed to him. It was the *Order of the Day*, published that morning. '… We are confident. Our defences are strong and our weapons efficient. Whatever our race, and whether we are now in our native land or have come thousands of miles, we have one aim and one only. It is to defend these shores …' Not knowing quite what was expected of him Walter nodded gravely as he handed

the paper back; but this pronouncement, when he had read it earlier, had seemed to him to be futile and inept. It simply served to draw attention to the fact that the different races in Malaya did not have one aim only, however ardently the Administration might wish that they did.

The Governor was evidently satisfied with his nod and did not pursue the matter further. He looked at his watch: the interview was at an end. Walter now found himself obliged to gulp off a large glass of beer while the Governor waited for him, tapping his foot. 'No hurry,' he said, noticing that Walter was becoming breathless, but at the same time stared about the room as if contemplating already the important matter which he would attend to as soon as he had got rid of his guest. Again Walter felt that he was being patronized and wished, having at last drained his glass, that he had simply put it aside with dignity, untouched.

To Walter's surpise, however, the Governor courteously set out with him on the long trek back across the deserted room: this gave him an opportunity to ask if there was any news of the fighting in the north. The Governor replied grimly that he had heard nothing definite, that the Military, as Walter could imagine, were inclined to keep these things to themselves, but that he suspected that they were not very much wiser than he was, as to what was happening. And a grimace of pain passed fleetingly across the Governor's handsome features, for Walter's question had touched on a raw nerve: Sir Shenton had known of the plan to launch an attack over the border into Siam to forestall Japanese landings at Singora and Patani. He had assumed, therefore, that if the Japanese had been obliged to land on Malayan soil at Kota Bahru it was because British troops had denied them Singora and Patani.

But this had proved not to be the case. They had landed successfully at all three places and were threatening not only the difficult and inhospitable east coast but also the fertile and vulnerable west coast. It was the west coast that mattered, after all! But, in theory at least, the Japanese should only be able to get at the vulnerable west coast by using the road from Singora. And on that road defences had been prepared to deal with them, protecting the rich, rice-growing area of Perlis and Kedah, the important aerodrome at Alor Star, a staging post for aircraft reinforcements from Ceylon, and, some way farther south, Penang itself. So a great deal would depend on these defences which had been set up a little to the north of Alor Star, at Jitra.

There did remain, however, just one other way in which the west coast might be threatened: that is to say, along the road from Patani that led through the mountains. Luckily Brooke-Popham and Malaya Command had thought of this and had sent two battalions up the road into Siam to occupy the only defensible position on it (The Ledge) before the Japanese could get there. The Governor was grateful for their foresight because even he, though no military expert, could see that if the Japanese started coming down the road from Patani they would be coming in behind the defences at Jitra and would be able to cut their communications. And if Jitra had to be abandoned, the important aerodrome at Alor Star would be lost, and perhaps even Penang into the bargain.

The two men had reached the door now and had paused on the point of saying goodbye. Or rather, it was the Governor who had paused: in the middle of some valedictory remark he had got stuck again in the contemplation of Walter's chin … For it seemed to Sir Shenton that, simply stated, the situation was this: if the Ledge went then the Jitra defences would be untenable; if the Jitra defences went then Alor Star would go, too; if Alor Star was lost then Penang and another important aerodrome at Butterworth would be in danger; and if … but, of course, it had not come to that and the Army was there to see that it never did. Why then had Blackett touched a raw nerve when he had asked for news of the fighting in the north? Precisely because the absence of news was beginning to be a cause for concern. The Japanese had landed at Patani in the early hours of Monday morning. Very well. But it was now Tuesday evening and he had still had no confirmation that the Ledge had been successfully occupied although more than thirty-six hours had elapsed. Sir Shenton did not know off-hand how far it was from the Malayan border to the Ledge but it could hardly be more than fifty miles. And the distance the Japanese would have to travel along that same road from Patani to reach the Ledge would not be much greater. In other words, by now both sides had had ample time to get there. Sir Shenton did not like to admit even to himself the possibility that the Japanese might have got to the Ledge first. Most likely there had been some breakdown in the communications which linked the Army with the Government.

'… For giving up your time. I know how busy you must be at the moment,' he said, concluding an earlier remark and at the same time releasing Walter's chin from his gaze. 'I hope you're doing something about that cough, Blackett,' he added, realizing that for the last few moments Walter had been trying to clear his bronchial tubes. 'They can be the devil even in this climate.' His eyes once more shifted towards Walter's chin as he said vaguely: 'Yes, yes … A jubilee? What jubilee?'

'Ours, sir … Blackett and Webb's,' said Walter patiently, but at the same time wondering whether it would be regarded as treason or merely as common assault to knock down His Excellency the Officer Administering the Government; he was also annoyed with himself for having twice in the course of the interview addressed the Governor as 'sir'. 'You and the Colonial Secretary both agreed that it would be of benefit to the morale of the Asiatic communities if we made a bit of a splash with our jubilee. You may remember our slogan: "Continuity in Prosperity" … Well, I just wanted to reassure you that we would keep steadfastly to our plans regardless of the Jap invasion.'

'That's the ticket, Blackett,' said the Governor with rather hollow enthusiasm. 'That's the spirit. Wish

everyone had your … Well, I must be getting on …' His eyes settled on Walter's chin again like two butterflies, but just for an instant, then they were away once more, chasing each other this way and that.

'You know, Walter,' he said suddenly and with unexpected warmth, 'we don't see enough of you and Sylvia. We're all too busy, I suppose. What lives we lead! Well, we must make amends one of these days! Goodbye.'

'Thank you, sir. Goodbye.'

'The Governor's not such a bad chap when you get to know him,' Walter was thinking as he descended the staircase, humming *The Roast Beef of Old England,* towards the marble hall. 'Rather out of touch, perhaps.'

31

Walter's more cheerful frame of mind was not fated to last much farther than the drive of Government House: sitting in the back of the Bentley as it crept out into the darkened city he recalled the Governor's distraught air and his mind filled with foreboding. If the Japanese became established on the peninsula, he had said, 'as they look like doing' …

Slowly they made their way up Orchard Roard in the gloom; the other cars they passed loomed up simply as dark shapes, headlights masked with metal grilles or paper. A steady rain had begun to fall. If it were like this in the north it would not be much fun fighting the Japs in the jungle. The Malay *syce* peered ahead into the darkness through the swirling, flowing windscreen wipers. Walter sighed and sat back, folding his arms impatiently. It irritated him to be driven at this speed: he had a great deal to do. Before he got down to work, however, he must look in at the Mayfair to see whether Matthew was showing any signs of recovery. And that was another important matter which must be seen to: Joan must be married off without any further delay. The many uncertainties which faced international commerce over the next few months and years required that a business should have the strongest foundations. He was fairly confident, however, that Joan could be left to deal with that side of things. It was true that so far, by her own account, she had not made as much progress as either of them would have hoped. At first, as she now admitted herself, she had underestimated the difficulties of attracting a young man like Matthew. For one thing he spent so much time talking about 'unreal things' … yes, she meant abstract … that it had been hard to get him to fix his attention on *her* rather than whatever it was that was passing through his mind. Hard, not impossible. Right from the beginning she had noticed him staring at her legs, which was encouraging. 'For another thing,' she had explained to Walter, 'half the time I believe that he can't actually *see* me … physically, I mean. Which makes things difficult. I often feel like snatching off his spectacles, giving them a good polish, and then putting them back on his nose again. He does *peer* at you terribly! And if he can't see me properly, I have to get him to *touch* me. Fortunately, he seems quite keen on the idea of *that* … but it's not all that easy to find opportunities. And now he's got this dratted fever just as I was beginning to make some solid progress. Oh, and incidentally, we must send Vera Chiang packing before he's up and about again. She's a distraction. We must keep his mind on *me.* No, Daddy, of course she isn't … at least, not a serious one.'

Well, so much for Matthew. He would be dealt with. There remained the Japs. It was intolerable that they should have been allowed to land at Kota Bahru. What did the Army think they were up to? Or was it the RAF's fault? His mind went back to the tedious disputes of the previous year between Bond and Babington as to who should be responsible for the defence of Malaya. It had been decided, had it not, that it was to be the RAF's job and that the Army would protect the northern airfields, of which there was one at Kota Bahru, the very place where the Japanese had succeeded in landing! Could it be that the years of endeavour that had gone into the building of Blackett and Webb into a successful enterprise were now to be put at risk by a handful of pig-headed officers and snobbish emissaries of the Colonial Office? 'Thank heaven that at least with the *Prince of Wales* and the *Repulse* in the Straits we have some protection for shipping!'

'Watch, Mohammed!'

The Bentley had braked suddenly, narrowly missing some dim object that had lumbered across its path, perhaps a rickshaw, it was impossible to tell in the swirling darkness. Walter sighed with irritation and his hand closed over the door handle. For a moment he was tempted to step out and finish his journey on foot despite the rain. He mastered his impatience, however, and sat back again.

Well, what of the enemy? Walter knew better than to accept the general view in Singapore that the Japanese were either ridiculous or incompetent. Indeed, the skill with which the Army had gradually tightened its grip on Japan's economy over the past decade was impressive. The policy of girding the economy for war, begun in Manchukuo under the sinister auspices of the South Manchuria Railway Company, had in due course spread back to Japan itself, leaving the *zaibatsu* (the old capitalist groups like Mitsui, Mitsubishi, Yasuda and Sumitomo which now found their enormous shipping, textile and trading industries beginning to flag) to compensate themselves as best they could with increased profits from their munitions and armaments factories. This diversion of resources from the *zaibatsu*, which had become even more pronounced since the beginning of the Sino-Japanese war, had provided Blackett and Webb with some relief in their Far Eastern trade as they struggled to recover from the Depression. Nevertheless, Walter had watched apprehensively the rise of the '*new zaibatsu*', the firms like Mori and Nissan whose fortunes had been derived from the manufacture of armaments and whose future prosperity would depend, perhaps, on the successful use of the

weapons they manufactured.

At last the car was edging its way off the road by the dim glow of its masked headlights. They had evidently arrived at the Mayfair. Walter continued to sit huddled in the back of the car, however, while the *syce* groped for his oiled-paper umbrella. Sometimes, in his rare moments of depression, Walter would imagine the whole of Malaya spread out before him with its population of Malays, Indians and Chinese all steadily working away. He would see the rubber and oil-palm plantations, the tin mines and rice fields, combining to produce a strong-flowing river of wealth. Above the mines and plantations, each of which sent its tributary to the main current, he would see a little group of Europeans … he saw himself and his family, he saw his colleagues from the Singapore Club, the men from Guthrie's and Sime Darby and Harrison's and Crossfield and the Langfields and Bowsers, all of them, the whole pack, he saw the police and the Government and the Military, the Shenton Thomases and Duff Coopers, the Brooke-Pophams and the Bonds and the Babingtons … he saw them all, herded together in a tiny élite group directing the affairs of the country. And then he would ask himself what would happen if, perhaps, some higher force removed this tiny élite group and replaced it by another … say, the South Manchuria Railway Company's executives … Would the Colony then, as one might expect, wither away promptly, like a plant whose head has been cut off, or would it, on the contrary, continue exactly as it had before, producing that steady, strong river of wealth exactly as if nothing had happened? Experience had taught him that the answer which condensed in his mind in response to this question varied according to his frame of mind. Thus it provided him with a useful barometer to his health and spirits.

'You blighters don't know how lucky you are, Mohammed,' growled Walter to the *syce* as the door beside him opened to the streaming blackness. The *syce*, who was used to having cryptic fragments of Walter's inner debates addressed to him, nodded and smiled politely, holding out the umbrella for Walter to step under and ignoring the rain that hammered on his own unprotected shoulders.

'Why don't they oil that damn thing?' Walter wondered a few moments later, standing in almost total darkness just inside the verandah door. There were distant sounds of movement and a scampering near the floor in the obscurity. He became aware than an animal of some sort was leaning forward to sniff him cautiously. A few seconds passed during which neither Walter nor this creature cared to make a move. Then an electric light was switched on, revealing a large Dalmatian. It wagged its tail briefly and then whisked away into the jungle of rattan furniture. Presently it returned followed by the Major.

'Ah, Major, I see you have a dog.'

The Major, who appeared to have just awoken, stared somewhat dubiously at the Dalmatian and said: 'Actually, it's not mine. It goes home tomorrow with luck.' After a moment he added: 'Watch out, there's another one behind you,' causing Walter to give a violent start; it was true: another shadowy animal had crept out of the furniture and with its head tilted on one side was running its nose over his ankle. It uttered a yelp as Walter aimed a kick at it; then promptly waddled away to take shelter behind the Major. As far as Walter could make out in the dim light it was an elderly and decrepit King Charles spaniel: its coat, which had plainly come under attack from some worm, was in some patches bald, in others matted and filthy; its tail hung out at a drunken angle and was liberally coated in some dark and viscous substance resembling axlegrease.

'I found it here when I got in this evening. Someone had left it tethered to the gatepost, with five dollars and a note. Probably someone who had heard of my lectures. Here, have a look.'

The note, typed with a great number of mistakes and unsigned, declared that the writer had been recalled to Europe at such short notice that he had had no time to settle his affairs. He urged the Major 'as a lover of dogs' to be so kind as to have this one destroyed. The money was enclosed to cover mortuary expenses. A harrowing postscript asserted: 'He was a faithful friend.' As if this were not enough the dog, perhaps divining that its fate was under discussion, set up a doleful whine and turned its bulging, bleary eyes up at the Major.

'It's a bit thick, frankly. I have enough on my plate already without having to deal with this poor little brute,' said the Major gloomily, stooping to tickle the animal behind one cankerous ear.

'Does it have a name?' asked Walter, retreating as the repulsive creature, reassured, made to approach him.

'The note doesn't say. Francois has taken to calling it 'The Human Condition" for some reason. I think he means it as a joke.'

'Well, you'd better have it done away with before it gives us all rabies,' said Walter. He became brisk again: 'I just came to enquire after young Webb. How is he?'

The two men set off down the corridor towards Matthew's room, the Major explaining that since the fever still had not abated they were continuing to give him large quantities of liquid. Dr Brownley was optimistic that the patient would soon be over the worst. The Dalmatian loped cheerfully after them, followed, groaning and gasping, at some distance by The Human Condition.

After a brief look at Matthew, who appeared to be still too busy thrashing and sweating beneath his mosquito net to recognize him, Walter took the Major by the arm for, as it happened, visiting the sick had only been part of his purpose in coming to the Mayfair. He also wanted to discuss Blackett and Webb's jubilee parade with the Major and, if possible, to conscript him to play a more active part in it. 'You'll be lending us a hand, won't you, Major?' he asked with a winning smile, and he went on to emphasize the great importance which the Governor himself was placing on this event, as he happened to know for a fact, just having come this moment from Government House. To cut a long story short Sir Shenton was absolutely relying on this

parade to keep up the morale of the Straits Settlements at this dire turning-point in their history … 'And he expects every one of us, Major, to put his shoulder to the wheel,' he was obliged to add, seeing that the Major was still showing signs of reluctance. Although work on the floats was well in hand there was still a great deal to be done in the way of organization. As soon as Matthew Webb had come to his senses again, every pressure must be exerted on him in order to persuade him to take the place that his father would have occupied had he lived: that is to say, he would have to sit on the throne as the symbol of Continuity and, no less essential, deliver a keynote speech on Prosperity as it affected workers of all races in the Colony.

Since the Major still hesitated and hung back, murmuring that he had a great deal to do in organizing his AFS unit and carrying the burden of his Committee for Civil Defence, Walter launched into an enthusiastic description of the way in which their plans for a parade had evolved into something more impressive: Blackett and Webb's jubilee parade would not only be a patriotic cavalcade of a magnificence rarely seen, it would also be a living diagram, as it were, of the Colony's economy in miniature, since the company was involved at least to some extent in every one of Malaya's principle trading and productive activities (though only indirectly in tin-mining and no longer to a great extent in the entrepôt business) … 'With the exception of palm-oil,' he muttered as an afterthought, looking uneasy. The Major was surprised to notice the look of uncertainty which passed fleetingly over Walter's commanding features. Walter coughed in a harassed sort of way and scratched the back of his head … but the next moment he was off again, brimming with confidence as he explained his 'grand design' to the Major.

The old idea, as the Major might remember, had been to have a series of floats depicting Blackett and Webb's commercial ventures, plus a few of the dragons that are *de rigueur* in any Chinese festival, a brass band or two and the usual fireworks. But, one of his brighter young executives had suggested, since the idea of the parade was partly to instruct, should they not broaden their scope in order to include some of the hazards which these commercial ventures had had to overcome, and still *were* having to overcome? A brilliant notion! In this way the idea of a counter-parade to accompany the parade had been born. And so what was now projected was to have Chinese acrobats, schoolboys, and volunteers of all races dress up in appropriate costumes as devils and imps accompanying the main procession, tumbling and turning cartwheels and playing pranks on the crowd, squirting water over them and so forth. Did the Major not think that was an idea of genius? These imps and devils would carry pitchforks to prod maliciously at the characters of Continuity and Prosperity, throwing banana skins in front of them and so on. And, of course, they would wear placards identifying them as the particular enemies of Continuity and Prosperity. Thus there would be imps and devils representing: 'Labour Unrest', 'Rice Hoarding', 'Japanese Aggression', 'Wage Demands' (what a fearful lot of banana skins this devil would scatter in front of Blackett and Webb's proud floats!), 'Foolish Talk', 'International Communism', 'Fraudulent Accountancy' (a great trick of the Chinese businessman who habitually keeps two sets of books), 'Racial Enmity', 'Corruption and Squeeze', 'Slander Against Government and British Empire', 'Slander Against Private Enterprise', 'Irresponsible Strikes' and many, many more: indeed, there were so many possibilities that they must be careful not to bury the floats completely … Well, what did the Major think? Would he enter into the spirit of the thing and perhaps wear one of the devils' costumes not yet allocated? Would he mind personifying 'Inflation', for example, which would mean dressing up in a fiery red costume with horns and a tail and lashing about with a tennis ball tied to a stick?

'Well, Walter, I'm not sure that I …'

'The Governor and Lady Thomas will be personally grateful to you, I happen to know,' said Walter, pressing his advantage as he saw the Major begin to weaken. 'He sets particular store by having a mixture of races. What we must have above all is Europeans! That is crucial to the whole exercise. We've even considered having an additional slogan: *"All in it together!"*'

'Well, I suppose, in that case …'

'Good man! I knew I could depend on you … Well, Major, I think it should be a success but sometimes I do have the feeling that there's something missing, that we still need a single float representing Singapore herself. We've thought of all the usual things, the Lion City and so on, but it's weak, it's been done before … We need to show Singapore in her relationship with the other trading centres of the Far East, holding them in a friendly grip. It's deuced hard to think of anything suitable, I can tell you! All we've managed to think of so far is to have Singapore at the centre of a float as a sort of beneficial octopus with its tentacles in a friendly way encircling the necks of Shanghai, Hong Kong, Bombay, Colombo, Rangoon, Saigon and Batavia. Of course, the snag is that the octopus does not have a very good reputation whereas …' Walter fell silent.

They were standing in the corridor. From a few feet away they could hear the springs of Matthew's bed as he thrashed and muttered and groaned in his fever. From the dim depths of the floor The Human Condition peered up at Walter in perplexity with its bulging eyes. The Major cleared his throat. 'Forgive me mentioning this, Walter, but I noticed a moment ago that you had a spot of something yellow on your chin … a spot of, well, egg, I suppose.'

'What?' cried Walter, clapping a hand to his chin in horror.

'Oh, it's nothing,' said the Major hurriedly, taken aback by the effect of his words. 'Just a spot of something … You can hardly see it.' Walter spat on a handkerchief and began to rub his chin violently. Watching him at work the Major could not help thinking: 'Walter *is* getting rather odd in some ways.'

Poor Matthew! What a terrible fever he had to endure! Every two or three hours he would be roused from his churning dreams and would find himself surrounded by a circle of Oriental faces, for Cheong had summoned assistance from his relatives. Then he would become aware of many hands hoisting him into the air while other hands dragged away the sodden sheets and replaced them with dry: these dry sheets would be wringing wet too, though, within a few moments. At intervals he would find a glass of cold liquid held to his lips: then he would gulp for his life, while faces flared up before his eyes. 'Hello you!' said Joan brightly, puffing away at a long cigarette holder, to be replaced in a moment by Charlie informing him that there was a huge demand for cheap coolie labour during the rice-milling season from January to May, or by an unknown doctor, an Englishman wearing a linen jacket and a striped tie. This man, he found, was talking to him cheerfully and evidently had been doing so for some time, encouraging him to swallow some white pills which lay in his yellowish, horny palm. As Matthew took them the doctor opened his mouth and gulped sympathetically, as if he too had some pills to swallow; then, satisfied, he beckoned Cheong forward with a pitcher of iced lemonade. Matthew gulped down glass after glass, before sinking back into his dreams … only to find a moment later that the Major's worried countenance was looming over him. He could tell by the Major's expression that something had gone dreadfully wrong. What was it he was trying to say to Dupigny on the other side of the bed? The Prince of Wales had called but had been repulsed! Matthew could just reach consciousness with his fingertips. If he could only drag himself up a little further! 'I had no idea he was even in Singapore,' he just managed to say before losing his grip and tumbling back head over heels into his churning dreams again.

Hours passed. Some time later, in a moment of lucidity which occurred while he was trying to thrash his way out of a net that German spies were throwing over him to prevent him rejoining the League 'somewhere in the Atlantic', Matthew found himself hanging upside down out of bed, neatly trussed up in a cocoon of mosquito netting which he had somehow dragged off its frame. From this odd position he had an excellent view of a number of neatly swept floorboards in diminishing perspective. Standing on these floorboards under the bed was what he at first took to be a chamber-pot … a moment later he realized that it was simply a basin which had been put there to collect his own sweat which was soaking through the mattress and steadily dripping into it. The basin was already brimming.

A faint clicking sound approached him across the floorboards and suddenly he found that his own eyeballs were a mere inch or two from another pair of eyeballs; these ones, bulging and bleary, were set in the hairy face of a Chinese demon, of a kind he had hitherto only seen sculpted in stone outside temples. Matthew was on the point of howling for Cheong to come and drive off this horrid little creature (it was not exactly sweet-smelling, either) but at this very instant the German spies, one of whom bore a stern resemblance to the portrait of his father in Walter's drawing-room, abruptly caught up with him and he was off again like a hare, twisting now this way, now that. His sweat continued its steady drip, drip, drip through the mattress.

When he finally returned to his senses the fourth day since he had been ill was just beginning. He lay half awake, listening for the drip of sweat beneath the bed. But now the silence, except for a distant creaking from outside the window, was complete. He crumpled the sheets in his fist: they were dry. Thank heaven for that! He wondered how many basins of his sweat had been poured away since his fever had begun; he felt so exhausted that it was as if he himself had been poured away.

The distant creaking, he noticed, was punctuated by an occasional thump. Creak, creak, thump! He dozed for a moment and woke again. Creak, creak, thump! Curiosity at last gave him the strength to make a move. Beside him lay a 'Dutch wife', a long narrow bolster whose purpose was to allow the air to circulate: he fought with it weakly and at last overcame it. Then with great difficulty he negotiated the fish's gill exit from the mosquito net. The window shutters were open and he could see that it was already growing light in the compound outside. Somewhere on the other side of the house the sun must be just rising. It was pleasantly cool by the window.

The creaking was coming from the clearing beside the recreation hut where the abandoned vaulting-horse stood with its companion, a big horizontal bar tethered by rusting guyropes. A slender girl who appeared to be Chinese was swinging by her hands from this bar, attempting by a sudden kick and a stiffening of her arms at the elbow to bring her waist up to it. (Did she have red hair or was that just a glint of sunrise?) But what caused Matthew to blink and wonder whether this was still part of his feverish fantasy, now taking a more agreeable turn, was the fact that she appeared to be stark naked.

He scratched his head and set off in search of spectacles, but it was some time before he managed to find them: Cheong, afraid that he might damage them in his delirium, had removed them to a place of safety. He crammed them on and hurried back to the window just in time to see the girl (Vera! Good gracious! Naked!) at last succeed in bringing her shoulders above the bar. She steadied herself there for a moment, recovering from the effort she had made. In the early light her skin shone greenish-white against the dark foliage around her.

Matthew now realized that he was not the only spectator of this scene, for an elderly orang-utan with elaborate mutton-chop whiskers lay sprawled in a rubber tree on the edge of the glade watching the girl's gymnastics. And while it watched her it distractedly ate an apple, holding it up from time to time for

inspection and meanwhile drumming absent-mindedly with the fingers of its other hand on its pale, bulging paunch. Still supporting her weight on her straightened arms, her body curved in a slim crescent, Vera managed to hook one leg over the bar and then, with more difficulty, the other, so that at last she sat precariously on top of it, hands between her thighs gripping the bar tightly to steady herself. When she was satisfied with her balance she let go of the bar with her hands, raised them above her head like a diver and threw herself backwards.

The orang-utan, on the point of taking a bite of apple, paused with its mouth open to watch the outcome of this reckless manoeuvre. The girl's flexed knees were still bent over the bar as she swung down through three-quarters of a circle trailing a stream of red-black hair behind her. Reaching the top of the arc she released the bar by straightening her legs, dropped to all fours on the grass, staggered a little, recovered her balance, stood up on tip-toe and marched smartly forward for three or four paces before returning to lean wearily against one of the perpendicular supports. Knitting its ginger brows the orang-utan returned its attention to the apple and, having smoothed its mutton-chop whiskers, took a bite.

Vera had her back to the orang-utan and perhaps had not seen it. She was leaning all her weight on the upright as if punting a boat and her chin rested charmingly on her raised arm. The orang-utan paused again in its eating and watched her. Then, holding the apple core delicately by its stalk in the fingers of its left hand it slipped from the branch on which it had been sitting, hung from it revolving by one finger for a few moments, then dropped silently to the ground. Now it hesitated for a moment, clearly in two minds as how best to proceed. It scratched its head, fingered the ginger hair that sprouted between its eyes, and at last began to move circumspectly towards the girl. Matthew watched as if in a dream (perhaps he was indeed in a dream).

She remained in exactly the same position, resting, lost in thought. The orang-utan moved towards her using the knuckles of its right hand to assist its progress, still holding the apple core in the other. Matthew would have called out but his vocal chords had ceased to work; besides, the animal did not appear aggressive in the least. As it drew near Vera another access of doubt overcame it. It halted, it looked around and rubbed its stomach dubiously, it plucked a blade of grass and threw it away. At length, however, it could wait no longer and, taking another step or two forward, it reached out to place one timid, hairy hand on the girl's naked bottom. Without turning she slapped the hand smartly. The orang-utan sprang back, shocked, and returned in haste to its rubber tree. There it set about nibbling with renewed energy at the apple core until presently there was nothing left of it but an inch of stalk which it threw away.

Vera, meanwhile, had turned and seen the pale and haggard Matthew watching her from the window. She waved. For a moment she seemed about to shout something to him but thought better of it, smiled, shook her head, picked up a white bath-robe which she threw over her shoulder and walked away from the house, shaking her finger at the orang-utan as she passed. The orang-utan watched her glumly from the tree.

Before she was quite out of Matthew's line of vision she threw the robe away again, poised for a moment, and then plunged forward headlong over the brilliant viridian lawn … which here astonishingly turned out to be water, for she landed with a great green splash and the lawn rippled about her in every direction and even lapped the edge of the tennis court. A moment later she had vanished from sight altogether and though Matthew waited by the window in case she should reappear there was no further sign of her.

Matthew left the window in a state of considerable excitement, not because he believed what he had just seen with his own eyes, but, on the contrary, because he was inclined to doubt it. Like everyone else he had, in his time, enjoyed a fair number of sexual dreams. Could it simply be another of these? The orang-utan, a clear symbol of male sexuality, had very likely been furnished by his own sub-conscious. The only trouble with this theory was that when he looked out of the window the symbol was still there, sprawled in the rubber tree and once more drumming idly with its fingers on its bulging abdomen … but never mind, there was no reason why it should not linger after the main vision had evaporated. He began to stride up and down, although rather weakly because of his state of exhaustion, discussing aloud with himself the implications of the strange hallucination from which he had just emerged. He must remember to mention it to Ehrendorf. No doubt the fever had heightened his sensibility, made porous the outer brickwork of his conscious mind!

Presently, though, he found himself climbing weakly back through the slit in his mosquito net, assisted by Cheong who was cooing reprovingly in Hokkien (or in Cantonese, for all Matthew knew), convinced that he had struggled out of bed in his delirium. And Matthew himself was obliged to conclude as he fell asleep again that his fever, far from subsiding, had perhaps taken a graver though not altogether unpleasant turn. But now he dreamed vividly that an old gentleman with a white beard was throwing a net over him: and he made such a good job of trussing Matthew up that for the next few hours he lay there unconscious, hardly moving a muscle. This unnatural stillness puzzled Cheong who looked in on Matthew from time to time throughout the day. But then, with 'foreign devils' one never knew what to expect: they were doubtless constructed on different principles from normal, beardless, small-nosed, odourless human beings like himself.

Cheong's father and two uncles had been shipped to Singapore as indentured coolies before the turn of the century in conditions so dreadful that one of the uncles had died on the way; his father had survived the voyage but the memory of it had haunted him for the rest of his life. He had transmitted his anger to Cheong, describing to him how agents had roamed the poverty-stricken villages of South China recruiting simple peasants with promises of wealth in Malaya together with a small advance payment (sufficient to entangle them in a debt they would be unable to repay if they changed their minds), then delivered them to departure-

camps known as ‘baracoons’; once there they were entirely in the power of the entrepreneur for use as cargo in his coolie-ships (each person allotted, as a rule, a space of two feet by four feet for a voyage that might take several weeks). No wonder Cheong was angry when he thought of how these simple people had been swindled and abused, of the thousands who had died like his uncle from illness or by suicide before reaching Malaya and beginning their years of servitude! But what affected him more deeply still was the knowledge that so few people in the Chinese communities of Malaya and Singapore now seemed to remember or care about the exploitation and suffering of their ancestors on these criminal voyages. These things must not be forgotten! Justice demanded that they should be known. With this in mind he had taken in the past few months the first laborious steps in educating himself at a night-school in the city, helped oddly enough by old Webb who had once, as it happened, shipped coolies himself, though only as deck-cargo with the other commodities in which he traded.

‘How strange these people are!’ he thought, looking at Matthew’s immobile form.

‘My dear chap, the way the war is going could hardly be better for us! There is no doubt about it. This time the Japanese have bitten off more than they can chew!’

It was the Major, standing beside Matthew’s bedside with a cheerful expression on his normally anxious face, who had just made this confident assertion. Matthew had just woken feeling much better after his long sleep. Dr Brownley had had a look at him and pronounced himself satisfied: another day or two’s rest and he should be back on his feet again. However, Dr Brownley had taken the Major aside on his way out to whisper one or two additional comments. He explained that a patient can suffer a serious depression after such a high fever: the system has to recover from the shock imposed upon it. Well, he happened to know that Matthew was a young man of great sensibility, excitable, given to sudden impulses. He did not, of course, consider it likely that Matthew, on hearing the news of the last few days, would snatch up a razor and cut his throat. There was, fortunately, no prospect of his doing anything so foolish (though it would probably be as well not to leave any sharp instruments lying about). It was simply that having just emerged from a debilitating illness a young man who, unlike himself and the Major, had been spared some of the buffets of life, was more likely to take things to heart which a more seasoned campaigner would shrug off without a second thought. For this reason the Major’s tone was cheerful as he recounted the reverses of the past few days.

Matthew listened in some surprise, first to the Major’s reassuring description of the first Japanese air-raid on Singapore, which had barely disturbed the slumbers of those living near where the bombs had fallen, then to his account of Japanese landings at Kota Bahru and elsewhere: where the latter were concerned the Major could inspire himself directly from the sedative communiqués issued by General Headquarters and did not have to fumble for words. So things were going along splendidly on that front but there was even better news to come! The Major, becoming more pleased than ever with the way things were going, explained that after the *Prince of Wales* and the *Repulse* had been sunk off the east coast a remarkably large …

‘Sunk!’ cried Matthew, lifting his large fist and waving it as if ready to fell the Major, not out of hostility but out of a need for a physical expression of his excitement, and at the same time rolling his eyeballs in a way which gave the Major to believe that perhaps his precautions in the breaking of bad news had not been exaggerated.

‘Sunk! But that’s dreadful! Our most modern battleship and cruiser …’

The actual sinking of these two capital ships, the Major agreed hastily, was not altogether good news, but what he had been going to say was that a remarkably large proportion of the officers and ratings of the two ships had been saved, some two thousand men.

‘But surely, the Japanese Navy isn’t …’

‘It wasn’t their Navy. It seems they were sunk by torpedobombers. But the thing is that …’ The Major paused, unable to think what the thing was. There was no disguising the fact that this was a terrible blow. Without those two powerful ships, and taking into account the loss of the American Pacific fleet at Pearl Harbor, the Japanese would have control of the South China Sea, and perhaps even of the Indian Ocean as well. The Australian and Dutch Navies surely had nothing to challenge them.

‘But what was the RAF doing?’ demanded Matthew, sinking back weakly against his pillow, extenuated by this sudden surge of emotion. The Major made no reply however, and silence fell. It was very hot in the room. The shutters were partly closed for the sake of the black-out (or ‘brown-out’); the only illumination came from a bedside lamp whose shade had been swathed by Cheong in heavy cloth so that it shed an oblique light against the wall. At the edge of this pool of light a tiny brown lizard of the kind known as a ‘chichak’ had stationed itself on the wall, motionless, its fat little legs flexed like those of a Japanese wrestler. Presently it emitted an oddly metallic clicking sound and the Major explained that the Malays believed that chichaks brought good luck to the houses where they appeared and that, moreover … He sighed and silence fell again.

‘What’s that noise?’

A roaring sound had begun outside and was steadily increasing in volume.

‘It’s just the rain,’ said the Major, wondering how the rest of the British warships might be faring in the wet darkness. It was on just such a night as this, in April 1905, that Admiral Rozhdestvensky and his forty-five elderly, barnacle-clad Russian warships and supply ships had steamed in a tepid downpour through the Straits

of Malacca on their long journey from the Baltic, too late to lift the siege of Port Arthur, aware that they were hopelessly outclassed by the Japanese fleet. What brave men, all the same! Sent to the other end of the world by the incompetents in the Ministry in St Petersburg; with crews untrained in war manoeuvres; without enough ammunition to practise gunnery; obliged to coal at sea as often as not for lack of a neutral anchorage that would accept them; continually obliged to stop as the engines of one ship after another broke down; and at the end of their long voyage only the prospect of being sent to the bottom by the superior Japanese fleet. The capture of Port Arthur and the Russian naval defeat at Tsushima, the Major reflected, should have been a warning not to underestimate the Japanese.

'François has gone up to Penang for a few days. He may have some news of how things are going in the north when he gets back.'

'Just listen to the rain!'

Now another grim possibility had occurred to the Major: if the Japanese Navy did get control of the Straits there would be nothing to prevent them landing troops behind the British lines at any point they wished. No doubt there were fixed defences already established at the most vulnerable places, but with such a long coastline to defend it was bound to be difficult. Still, they had the RAF to reckon with.

Now from another part of the house there came the plaintive cry of the door's rusty hinges and, a moment later, voices on the verandah.

'I wonder who that can be? I'd better go and see.' The Major stood up.

'Enter two drowned rats,' laughed Joan, putting her head round the door before the Major could reach it. 'We were halfway through the compound when it started to come down in torrents. It's no good trying to shelter, either. You get just as wet standing under a tree.'

Matthew and the Major stared at her in wonder. Her hair had turned a shade or two darker and stuck to her forehead and cheeks in wet ringlets: water was still gleaming on her neck while her sodden dress clung to her so intimately that one could make out on her heaving chest the two little studs of her nipples and the flutter of her diaphragm where the ribs parted: evidently she had been running.

'Come and sit down,' said the Major genially. 'But I can only see one drowned rat. Where's the other?'

Matthew smiled wanly at Joan as she came to sit beside him, clearly not in the least abashed to be seen in wet and semi-transparent clothing. Indeed, she was positively sparkling with health and high spirits after sprinting through the downpour. 'How attractive she is!'

'The other is Papa. He's just gone to get a towel from the "boy". But here he comes now.'

Walter, too, seemed to be in exceptionally good spirits, as if the sudden downpour had revived him. Of late he had a careworn air, as if his manifold responsibilities were at last beginning to get the better of him: he had begun to hesitate in a way he had never done before, to speculate too exhaustively about the possible consequences of his decisions. The absence of old Mr Webb's strong character in the background, the uncertainty which clouded the political future of the Colony, the blunder he had made over those huge stocks of rubber he had waiting on the quays, all these matters had combined to sap his strength of purpose. But Walter was not the sort of man who could be kept down for very long. What were all these difficulties but the biggest challenge he had had to face since the Depression? Having decided to define his problems as a challenge he found that a weight had been lifted from his mind. Now he stood there laughing, his stocky figure radiating energy, quite oblivious of the puddle of water which had formed around his shoes. Snatching up a rattan chair he set it down by Matthew's bedside saying:

'Soaked to the skin! That's what comes of trusting your daughter, Major. Well, Matthew, you look a hundred per cent better … You've lost a bit of weight, perhaps, but there's no harm in that for a man of your size …' And on he went, his voice reverberating confidently above the roar of rain drumming on the roof.

Matthew and the Major stared at him, hypnotized. The Major, who had become accustomed to seeing Walter despondent or full of bitter nostalgia for the old days, was delighted to see the change that had come over him. Matthew lay back against his pillows looking somewhat bewildered but pleased that everyone should be in such a good mood despite the sinking of the *Prince of Wales* and the *Repulse*.

'Now, my boy,' said Walter affably, 'these are momentous days we're living through and it's time we had a serious discussion about what's to become of you. No, now wait a jiffy, you'll have your chance to say your piece in a moment. What I want to say is this … Now that your poor father is no longer with us I feel I have a special responsibility not just to my own family but to you as well … Well, m'lad, I've had my eye on you and if you don't mind me saying so it's become pretty clear to me that you've taken a bit of a shine to my daughter Joan here and, frankly, young man, I can't say I blame you because she's a good young woman even if she does get her old Papa soaked to the skin from time to time, ha! ha! … and, between you and me, half the young fellows in Singapore are after her …'

'But, Walter! Well, I mean, good heavens … !' cried Matthew and began to struggle agitatedly with his sheet and the 'Dutch wife' and a fold of the mosquito net which had come adrift, as if he meant to spring out of bed and start pacing up and down. The Major, indeed, jumped up to restrain him, very concerned by the stare of excitement in which the patient had been thrown by Walter's curious preamble about his daughter. But the Major's intervention was not needed for Matthew had somehow got himself so entangled in his sheet that in his weakened state he could scarcely move and presently subsided again.

Walter, meanwhile, ignoring this commotion, held up his hand and, nodding towards his daughter, went on

steadily: ‘And she, if I’m not talking out of turn, has a bit of a soft spot for you. Isn’t that right, m’dear? Well, in these circumstances I think that there’s only one course for sensible people to take … And I think we all know what *that* is! There now, I’ve said my party piece.’ Walter sat back, thoroughly satisfied with the way the interview was going.

‘But Mr Blackett … That’s to say, Walter …’ exclaimed Matthew, still bound to the bed by the folds of his sheet but rolling his eyeballs excitedly. ‘What can I say? I mean, I’m certainly very fond of Joan, that’s true, but never for a minute … I mean, such an idea has never even … but perhaps I’ve got the wrong end of the stick … Well, I simply don’t know what to say.’ He gazed at his companions, quite overwhelmed by this unexpected development. Once again it seemed to him that reality had taken a dream-like turn, for while Walter had been making his extraordinary speech Cheong had stolen up behind him with a towel and had set to work, his face perfectly impassive, briskly rubbing down Walter’s head and patting his pink, commanding cheeks, so that an occasional word here and there in Walter’s discourse had been muffled by a thickness of towel, causing Matthew to be not altogether sure that Walter *was* saying what he appeared to be saying. When Cheong had finished with Walter he started to rub no less briskly at Joan’s damp ringlets, but after a moment she motioned him away.

Although Joan had not assented very vigorously when her father had declared that she had a ‘soft spot’ for Matthew (instead she had gazed calmly at the floor where another puddle was beginning to form between her feet) neither had she uttered any word that might be interpreted as a disclaimer. Now, when she spoke, it was merely to ask, looking round: ‘Has the “boy” gone? If so, I’m going to take off this wet dress if you don’t mind. You don’t mind, do you, Papa?’

‘I don’t mind in the least, m’dear, but you’d better ask these gentlemen … though I’m sure they’re men o’ the world enough not to mind seeing a fat little piglet like you in your underwear … You don’t mind, do you, Major?’

‘Oh, me? Not at all, not at all,’ mumbled the Major, laughing and clearing his throat; and he puffed with embarrassment at his pipe, stopping and unstopping its bowl with two fingers to make it draw. He might have been thinking, as he cast a hasty, sidelong glance at Joan’s agreeable figure, that even with advancing years a man might still be troubled by thoughts of … well, never mind … who knows what he was thinking as he puffed at his pipe, for presently he had disappeared into a blue haze of tobacco smoke?

As for the patient, despite his weakened condition and his confused state of mind, his eyes wandered appreciatively over Joan’s gleaming skin as she stepped out of her sodden dress and he seemed to be thinking: ‘Well, a body’s a body, for all that,’ or something of the sort.

‘You don’t mind, Papa,’ asked Joan, smiling mischievously, ‘if I climb into bed beside Matthew until the rain stops? I’ll be much more comfortable. We can have the “Dutch wife” between us.’

‘Oh, the little rascal,’ chuckled Walter. ‘Oh, the little hussy! What d’you think of that, Major? And before her own father’s very eyes! And *what*, I should like to know, young lady, would your mother say if she could see you now?’ And while Joan hung her dress on a coat-hanger to dry before climbing into bed Walter beamed at Matthew more expansively than ever. ‘Well, there you are, my boy,’ he seemed to be saying. ‘There are the goods. You won’t find better. You can see for yourself. It’s a good offer. Take it or leave it.’

Presently, when the rain had stopped, Walter and Joan made their way back through the compound beside pools of rainwater which were now reflecting the stars. Father and daughter did not speak as they made their way through the drenched garden but they did not have to: they understood each other perfectly. Abdul, the old major-domo, was waiting for them, concerned that they should have got such a soaking.

‘What news, Master?’

‘Good news, Abdul!’ replied Walter in the conventional manner, but as he went upstairs to change his clothes he thought: ‘Yes, good news!’

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‘Well, I suppose it *might* be true,’ the Major was saying doubtfully. ‘One never knows. I was in Harbin in 1937 and there was still a lot of White Russians there at the time. A lot of the poor devils were starving, too.’

The Major and Matthew were sitting in the office which had once been old Mr Webb’s. Matthew, drained of all energy, had at last managed to leave his bed and drag himself as far as his father’s desk where he sat drowsing over an untidy pile of reports, accounts and miscellaneous papers concerning the rubber industry. The Major, filled with concern by the young man’s sombre and listless frame of mind, attempted from time to time to engage him in cheerful conversation. But these days what was there to be cheerful *about?* Only the subject of Vera Chiang had aroused a tiny spark of interest in the patient: Matthew had remembered a dream conversation between Vera and Joan in which Vera had claimed that her mother was a Russian princess and her father a Chinese tea-merchant … or something of the sort. What did the Major think of it? The Major, it turned out, had heard the same story from Vera with one or two added details and had politely suspended disbelief. After all, far-fetched though it sounded, one never knew. Stranger things had happened in that part of the world in the last few years.

‘By the way, where is she? I thought she was supposed to have a room here still.’

‘One of Blackett and Webb’s vans came to pick up her belongings the other day. Not that they needed a van, mind you. There was only a small bag and a parcel or two. I gather Walter wanted her moved out for some reason, he didn’t say why. But she’s a friendly sort of girl and I expect she’ll look in to say hello one of these days.’ The Major stood up. ‘I must go and do some work. Monty said he’d be dropping in to see you presently.’

Matthew had begun to drowse over his papers once more when Monty suddenly appeared.

‘Congratulations,’ he said. Monty was looking preoccupied for some reason.

‘How d’you mean?’

‘Well, I hear you and Joan are thinking of teaming up.’

‘Oh, it hasn’t quite come to that, has it? I mean, I know your father did say something the other night about it being a good idea, or something on those lines. But I don’t think anything, well, *definite* was decided, you know … At least that was my impression. After all …’

But Monty merely shrugged; he did not seem particularly interested in the matter. He said vaguely: ‘I expect I got hold of the wrong end of the stick … But from what they’ve been saying I thought they were planning a wedding … You know, bridesmaids and all that rubbish.’ Monty collapsed into a chair and put his feet up on Matthew’s desk, upsetting a tumbler full of pencils as he did so but making no effort to gather them up again. ‘I suppose this means you aren’t going to want to come in with me and the other two chaps in sharing this Chinese filly,’ he said morosely, ‘that, is, if you and Joan *are* teaming up. It’s going to make it damned expensive for the rest of us,’ he added accusingly.

‘But Monty …’

‘The other two are regular fellows. Great sports. And it’s not as if there were enough white women to go round (if there were I’d tell you). I don’t suppose you know that there’s only one to every fifty white blokes.’

‘I told you ages ago, Monty, that I wasn’t interested. It’s not my cup of tea.’

‘Oh, all right, all right. Don’t go on about it. It doesn’t matter to me whether you come in or not, though you’ll be missing a splendid opportunity. That’s your look-out, though.’ Monty sighed heavily. ‘I really came over to explain about the replanting of rubber trees on your Johore estate. The Old Man said I ought to keep you in the picture though you’re probably not interested. The answer is simply that it’s more profitable to replant now than to go on tapping.’

‘But how can it be? I thought there was someone clamouring for every scrap of rubber we produce.’

‘It’s to do with the excess profits tax … You don’t want me to go into it, do you?’

But Matthew evidently did want him to, and so, with a much put-upon air, Monty removed his feet from the table and began to explain. When the war had broken out in 1939 a sixty per cent excess profits tax had been slapped on all sterling companies either at home or abroad. Blackett’s hadn’t minded too much at first. Propitious years, as far as they were concerned, had been chosen for the calculation of ‘standard profits’. ‘We found we could still keep our hands on a satisfactory chunk of the profits. All well and good. But then I’ll be damned if they don’t increase the excess profits tax to one hundred per cent! Can you beat it?’ Monty, his eyes blue and bulging like his father’s, stared at Matthew in disgust.

At the same time the price of rubber had risen and more of it could be released under the Restriction Scheme. ‘The next thing we find is that we can make the bloody “standard profits” (all we’re allowed, the British Government confiscating the rest) by producing a *smaller amount of rubber* than we’re actually allowed to release to the market! Can you beat it? What’s the point in producing more when we don’t make any profit by doing so?’

Monty’s gaze had momentarily become troubled for, although on the whole he believed he did understand his father’s commercial strategy (and admired it, too, his father was hot stuff when it came to spotting opportunities), there was one of Walter’s initiatives for which a sound commercial reason had so far eluded him: the signing of contracts with the Americans, for huge quantities of rubber for which no shipping could be found. The accumulation for this rubber on the quays directly contradicted, as far as Monty could see, the other policy of not producing rubber from which no profit could be made. The excess profits tax would apply just as much to the American contracts. It was a mystery which Monty could not explain … though there must be an explanation. Monty had even, for want of anything better, come close once or twice to suspecting his father of patriotism. But no, it surely could not be that. He had, of course, asked Walter for an explanation, but he had shown signs of extreme exasperation and had declined to reply. However, the truth was at last beginning to dawn on Monty in the past few days following the Japanese attack. It was a terrible truth, if Monty had guessed correctly, but was there any other explanation? Walter, in his omniscience, had foreseen the Japanese attack. More than that, he had foreseen the capture of Malaya or destruction of Singapore. He was actually wagering on the capture or destruction of all that rubber and planning to demand compensation from the Government in some more healthy part of the world! True, this did seem, even to Monty, an extravagant wager, but what other reason could there be? His father never did anything in business without a sound reason.

‘Anyway,’ he said, returning his attention to Matthew, ‘we decided that the only sensible thing to do was to replant … Why? Because replanting expenses are allowable against tax.’

‘Even if it means replanting perfectly healthy and productive trees!’ exclaimed Matthew.

‘Certainly! Because we’re replanting them with these newly developed clones I was telling you about. When

they're mature in a few years time they'll produce almost twice as much per tree.'

'But what about the War Effort? Everyone's crying out for rubber *now* not in a few *years*' time. And we're cutting down the trees that produce the stuff and-planting seedlings in their place. And we aren't even slaughter-tapping, as far as I can make out! It's madness.' Casting off his apathy Matthew had sprung to his feet and now gripped Monty's arm with one hand and the lapels of his jacket with the other. Monty uttered a hoarse cry of alarm and flinched away under this onslaught, convinced that he was about to be assaulted by Matthew whose reason clearly swung on very fragile hinges. Monty was not surprised: he had suspected as much for some time. Next time he would see to it that his father dealt with this madman.

'Well, it wasn't my idea,' he murmured soothingly. 'Don't blame me. You'll have to take it up with Father, though I must say …' he added more confidently as Matthew released him and began to pace up and down the room, waving one fist certainly, but otherwise not looking so dangerous, '…that I really don't think you should take this pious attitude the whole time. People don't go in for that sort of thing out here. As a matter of fact, they think it's deuced odd, if you want to know. But of course, you must suit yourself,' he went on hurriedly, as Matthew turned towards him once more.

'But it's not that, Monty … it's a matter of principle.'

'Yes, yes, of course it is,' agreed Monty. 'Anyway, I must be on my way now. I've a lot to do. You don't want to change your mind about that Chinese girl… No, no, I can see you don't. It's quite all right. Well, goodbye!' And Monty beat a hasty retreat, thankful to have escaped without any broken bones.

Matthew sank back into his chair, exhausted once more. He poured himself a drink of iced water from the vacuum flask on his desk and gulped it quickly; he must soon have a talk with Walter and try to persuade him to stop all this ridiculous replanting. How much had already been carried out? He searched in vain among the papers on his desk but he could not find the figures he wanted before lethargy once more stole over him. With an effort he roused himself and went outside to the tinroofed garage where the Major was performing a laborious inspection of the trailer-pump. He intended to discuss the replanting issue with the Major and installed himself in the Major's open Lagonda nearby: but the heat and his lassitude were too much for him and soon he was drowsing again with his feet poking out of the open door while the Major inspected and cleaned the pump's sparking-plugs. The Major suspected that it would not be very long before this machine found itself in service. Meanwhile, The Human Condition, diminutive, elderly and frail, dozed perilously under one wire-spoked wheel of the motor-car which was on a slight gradient and might decide to roll forward at any moment, putting an end to its miseries.

The Major was thinking of Vera Chiang as he worked, and of Harbin in 1937. 'How hard life can be for refugees!' he mused, squinting at a sparking-plug (his eyesight was no longer what it had been). 'We don't realize in our own comfortable, well-ordered lives what it must be like to lose everything in one of these political upheavals that bang and clatter senselessly round the world like thunderstorms uprooting people right and left.' He sighed and the sparking-plug which lay in his palm grew blurred and changed into a picture of Harbin … what was it? … four, no, five years ago almost. Harbin had surely been one of the most depressing places on earth.

That had been on the Major's first trip out East … when he had suddenly, on an impulse, decided to give up the settled, comfortable life he was leading in London and see the world, visit François in Indo-China, visit Japan, too, and see what all the fuss was about … see what life itself was all about before it was too late and old age descended on him. You might have thought that Harbin was a Russian city from the great Orthodox cathedral towering over Kitaiskaya and Novogorodnaya Street, and from the Russian shop-signs you saw, the vodka, the samovars, the Russian cafés and the agreeable sound of the Russian language being spoken everywhere. But it was a Russian city which had turned into a nightmare of poverty for the White Russians who had been washed eastwards on the tidal wave of the Revolution. How helpless they were! How few human beings, the Major thought with a sigh, can exert by hard work, thrift, intelligence or any other virtue the slightest influence on their own destiny! That was the grim truth about life on this planet.

Until Manchukuo had bought the Chinese Eastern Railway from the Soviet Government the year before the Major's visit, there had at least been a large contingent of Soviet railway employees in Harbin to patronize the Russian shops and cafés, but by the time he had arrived even this flimsy economic support had been pulled from under the refugees. The railwaymen had returned to Russia, leaving the refugees to destitution. At one time there had been 80,000 of them; by the time the Major had arrived this number had dwindled by half. Those young and strong enough had gone south to look for some means of support in a China which was itself ravaged by famine and bandit armies. Those who stayed in Harbin very often starved. The Major himself had seen ragged white men pulling rickshaws in Harbin.

Vera Chiang had spent her childhood and adolescence in Harbin: that much was certainly true for when the Major had questioned her about it she had known every corner of the city. Her mother had died there, 'of a broken heart', she said sometimes; 'of TB' she said at others. She had only been a child then. Her father had gone south to try to establish another business to replace the one he had lost in the Revolution in Russia, leaving her in a school run by American missionaries. Thus she had learned to speak English. How sad and lonely she had been! she had told the Major with a tear sparkling in her eye, while the Major murmured comfortingly; he had never been able to resist a woman in distress. But how much worse her life had become when a message, long-delayed, had reached her from her father. He was lying ill, broken by poverty, in

Canton. 'Selling the last of my mother's rings I set out …' Easily affected by feminine distress though he was, the Major had been assailed by misgivings at this point … But still, one never knew. One thing was certain: you had to account for Vera Chiang *somehow*! Her Russian recollections were not very convincing, though. Furs, and icicles on window-panes, and snow on the rooftops, steam hanging in the 'biting air' from the horse's nostrils, and jewels winking at the throat of the noblewomen who had leaned over her cot, for she had been a baby at the time of the Revolution, of course, the sleigh's runners hissing in the snow as they glided east to escape the Bolsheviks, her own little black almond-shaped eyes completely surrounded by fur, gazing out over the interminable, frozen wastes of Russia. That sort of thing. It was not impossible, of course. Above all, it was the mother's rings that made the Major uneasy. The reason was this. In a Shanghai nightclub the Major had found himself talking to one of the hostesses, a beautiful Russian girl, also a princess, who after one or two decorous waltzes had confessed her predicament to him: the following morning, as soon as the pawnbroker's shop opened for business, she would have to pawn her mother's wedding ring in order to prevent her younger sister from selling herself as a prostitute. Good gracious! What a business! What could the Major do but try to help avert this calamity? Well, you see, the Major's dilemma was that *sometimes these stories were true*. Not very often, perhaps, but *sometimes.*

The Major had frozen into an attitude of despair, staring unseeing at the sparking-plug in his hand. Perhaps sensing that his thoughts had taken a bleak turn, The Human Condition left its perilous couch under the wheel of the Lagonda and crept over to lean its chin on his shoe, revolving its bulging eyeballs upwards to scan the Major's gloomy features. Could it be that the Major was brooding over the best way to have a dog done away with? But no, the Major was still thinking of refugees, this time of those who had managed to escape from Harbin, moving south to where there were other cities with foreign concessions, to Tientsin and farther, to Shanghai. But even in Shanghai there were many Russians who found themselves starving side by side with the most wretched of Chinese coolies, obliged to sleep on the streets or in the parks through the bitter Chinese winter, candidates to join the grim regiment of 'exposed corpses'. These gaunt scarecrows for a few years had haunted the foreign concessions. But time is cruel: people get shaken down into a society or shaken out. History moves on and the problem gets solved, one way or another, without regard to our finer feelings.

And Vera? Her father, she said, had had a stroke and was half paralysed. She had gone to Canton to support him as best she could (the Major had tactfully refrained from asking how). They were in destitution. Presently he had died and she had moved on to Shanghai. She had lived there for a couple of years until there had been some trouble with a Japanese officer. Then, with the help of some friends, she had come here to Singapore.

Well, was she indeed the daughter of a Russian princess and a Chinese tea-merchant? Was it likely that a Russian princess would marry a Chinese tea-merchant? No, but many strange alliances had been bonded in the bubbling retort of the Revolution in its early years. Vera, now in her early twenties, would be just about the right age, certainly, to be the product of such a desperate union. In Harbin, he recalled, it had been a common sight to see young women of noble blood sweeping out the Russian shops on Novogorodnaya Street or waiting at café tables beneath the inevitable, gradually yellowing portrait of the last Tsar. In such desperate circumstances people will do whatever is necessary to survive. Moreover, as the circumstances grew more desperate it had turned out, like it or not, that an attractive Russian girl, princess or dairy-maid, had at least *something* to sell … if only herself. In Harbin, he had heard, British and American visitors were sometimes approached by destitute Russians inviting them to abscond with the wives they could no longer support. The Major himself had been approached in that nightmare city by a young Russian girl in rags, anxious to exchange the use of her body for a meal. He sighed. Sometimes in Harbin he had wished he had never left London; if this was what finding out about 'life' entailed he would rather have remained in ignorance.

In Shanghai things had not been quite so bad. Attractive Russian girls could do better there, it transpired, because white taxi-girls were very popular with wealthy Chinese and could earn a reasonable living in the city's dance-halls and cabarets. They earned, he had been told, two Chinese dollars commission on every bottle of champagne they sold. Moreover, in the brothels of Shanghai, while a Chinese girl was available from one Chinese dollar upwards, the minimum price for a white girl had been ten dollars. And for the princely sum of fifty dollars, so the Major had been informed on good authority, you could have a nude dance performed in the privacy of your own home or hotel room, by six Russian girls. The Major, despite the urgings of his informant, had not been tempted: it was not that he had been daunted by the expense; it was simply that he could not visualize himself cloistered in his hotel room with six naked White Russian ladies … perhaps even unclothed members of Russia's fallen aristocracy. Besides (he found himself calculating providently), even for the libidinous it did not seem such very good value since, for another ten dollars, you could have enjoyed the six girls severally at the going rates.

Now in turn the nightclubs of Shanghai grew blurred and were replaced by a sparking-plug lying in a wrinkled palm and by a pair of bleary, anxious eyes. The Major turned the palm over to look at the watch on his wrist. The light was beginning to fade and it was a little cooler. Matthew, still looking weary, was struggling out of the Lagonda. With a sigh the Major replaced the plug in the pump and went to wash his hands. He had accepted an invitation to eat with Mr Wu, the Chinese businessman who had joined the Mayfair AFS unit. As he climbed the steps to the verandah he paused for a moment to look up while a single Blenheim bomber droned acros the opal sky in the direction of Kallang aerodrome. Later, he picked up the *Straits Times*, while waiting for Mr Wu, to read about how black things were looking for the Japanese.

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From the beginning the Major and Mr Wu had conceived a great liking for each other. Each, indeed, recognized in the other a person so much after his own heart that it swiftly became clear to Mr Wu that the Major was simply an English Mr Wu, and to the Major that Mr Wu was nothing less than a Chinese Major. Mr Wu had even, some ten years earlier, served in what the Major supposed must have been the Kuomintang Air Force in China, for on one occasion he had given the Major a card on which, beneath a sprinkling of Chinese characters, one could read in English: 'Captain Wu. Number 5 Pursuiting Squadron.' The Major, in any case, since his arrival in the East had realized that there was no other race or culture on earth that he admired so much as the Chinese, for their tact, for their politeness, their good nature, their industry and their sense of humour. And Mr Wu combined all these virtues with a great warmth of character. He and the Major got on like a house on fire, a friendship conducted as much with smiles as with words because while Mr Wu's grasp of English was loose the Major, for his part, could get no purchase on Cantonese at all.

Now they were sitting together smiling in a companionable silence in the back of Mr Wu's elderly Buick on the way to some restaurant. Meanwhile, the Major was once more pondering the question of whether the Chinese community would remain loyal. If all the Chinese were like Mr Wu they would certainly help defend Malaya against the Japanese as staunchly as if it were their own country. For the Straits-born Chinese, of course, it really *was* their own country, but did they regard it as such? For the Major, no less than Walter, was worried about the prospects for Malaya's plural society when faced with the homogeneity of Japan. What chance would muddled, divided Malaya have against the efficiency and discipline he had seen everywhere on his visit to Manchukuo and to Japan itself?

After several months in the Far East the Major had been amazed to find trains running more regularly than they did in Europe: on his way to Harbin from Dairen he had taken the *Asia*, the 60-m.p.h. luxury express that was the pride of the South Manchuria Railway Company. Why, it had even had a library of books in English for the delectation of its Anglo-Saxon passengers! But you should not, for all that, think that you were in an imitation Western country: if, as the train began to pull out of the station, you happened to look out at the people on the platform who had come to see their friends off, you would see no emotional waving or shouting: you would see instead that they folded themselves to the ground and bowed low to the departing train, all together like a cornfield in a sudden gale. The Major had received a little shock when he had seen that; he had allowed himself to forget just how different the Japanese were from Europeans.

Yes, the Japanese, thought the Major beaming at his friend, Mr Wu (where were they going, by the way?), were an astonishingly determined and disciplined people. They believed in doing things properly, even in Manchukuo. In the barbers' shops there they even went so far as to wash clients' ears in eau de Cologne! You only had to see what they had accomplished … the rebuilding of Changchun, for instance, formerly a mere collection of hovels, into a modern city with electric light, drains, parks, hospitals, libraries and even a zoo. There was, besides, that which no civilized modern city could possibly do without: a golf course!

Some young Japanese officers, seeing that the Major, from force of habit, was travelling with his ancient wooden golf clubs in his luggage, had invited him to play a few holes with them at the golf links on the outskirts of the city. He had declined the opportunity to play but had gone along to watch. For half the year, the officers explained, one was obliged to drive off into the teeth of the Siberian winter, for the other half into a Mongolian dust-storm. The Major had watched from the club-house, intrigued, as his new friends, wearing respirators, vanished gamely into the clouds of dust, driven here for hundreds of miles over the plains by the never-ceasing wind. Here and there the Major could see a patch of snow but not a single blade of grass (grass had been imported, he was told, but had not survived). Certainly, the Japanese were determined to do things properly!

In due course the young officers had returned, having surrendered a prodigious number of golf balls to the Mongolian plain, true, but with the obligations to civilized modern living thoroughly satisfied. Next they had whisked the Major, whom they had now identified not only as golfer and gentleman but as a brother officer into the bargain, off to a nearby inn for a meal of raw fish and eggs washed down by gallons of warm *saké*. With the utmost sincerity and good fellowship they explained to the Major as best they could in a mixture of English, French and German, how distressed they had been by certain apparently anti-Japanese *démarches* taken by the British in their China policy. They themselves, they explained, did not feel the ill-will towards the British that many of their young comrades felt. No, they felt more sorrow than anger that Britain should support the Nanking Government in its anti-Japanese behaviour and believed it was because the respected British people were so far away that they did not fully understand what the bandit war-lords of the Kuomintang were up to.

The Major, at the best of times, had trouble making up his mind about these perplexing international issues; but squatting on the floor of the inn with his new friends, some of whom wore military uniform, others kimonos, he soon found that the *saké* had stolen clean away with even those few elements of the situation which he believed he had grasped. To make matters worse, just as he felt he was beginning at last to get his teeth into the problem, a geisha girl dressed and painted like a charming little doll suddenly appeared and

sang a song like that of a lonely wading-bird in a remote Siberian river, so charming, so melancholy, on and on it went, reedy, lyrical, moving, and sad … the Major was transfixed by its sadness and beauty and could have gone on listening for hours, but wait, what was it he had been about to say about the Nanking Government?

'It is sincere wish, Major Archer,' declared one of his more articulate companions, throwing off yet another thimbleful of *saké*, 'that when we have cleared away bad China policy Japan and England co-operate in friendship for economic develop of China.'

'Well, I must say …' the Major agreed affably, while someone else was saying that they were not interesting in helping Osaka merchants attack Lancashire merchants ('Well, that's splendid!' declared the Major heartily). They were against Big Business and their only desire was to spread Japanese National Spirit, although for the moment they might be obliged to make use of Big Business for their own ends such as develop of Manchuko. Yes, it was the Japanese National Spirit which was the important thing!

'I must say I thoroughly approve of your Japanese National Spirit,' said the Major holding his thimble of *saké* aloft and smiling.

'Ah so?' His companions looked surprised and gratified by this remark. The Major, who had merely been attempting a pleasantry, was a little disconcerted but thought it best not to explain. It was not the first time that one of his jokes had failed to find its mark.

Encouraged by the Major's approval, his friends now began to enlarge on National Spirit though this was not easy to define. There were many aspects of it: Loyalty to Emperor: the Major had perhaps visited Tokyo and seen ordinary citizens stand beside the huge moat surrounding the Imperial Palace and bow towards the gate which the Emperor sometimes used? Then there were Morals, too: not long ago a group of patriotic young students had burst into a dance being held at a fashionable Tokyo hotel and obliged all Japanese couples to leave the floor as 'a disgrace to the country' … ('I say, that's a bit steep, isn't it?' murmured the Major) … but, of course, foreigners were not molested. It was, the Major should understand, to protect national ideals and national customs against the taint of foreign influence that such action was necessary. In schools, too, it was most important that national purity and loyalty to Emperor should be maintained. An officer on the Major's right, who took a particular interest in education, now withdrew a book from the folds of his kimono and began to talk with great emphasis, his dark eyes burning.

The Major had noticed this particular fellow earlier because he had made a bit of a scene out at the golf club. While his comrades had been teeing up their balls and peering at them through the windows of their respirators before driving off into the swirling dust-clouds on a compass bearing for the first green, this man had begun shouting at them from a distance and waving his arms, making quite a din despite the howling of the wind. Since they paid no great attention to him he came, presently, to stand directly in front of where they were shifting their feet and waggling their wrists over their golf balls, in the very direction in which they were about to drive off. Not content with that, he even unbuttoned the tunic of his uniform to expose his naked chest to the bitter wind. And he had gone on standing there, still shouting, until two or three of the golfers had thrown down their clubs and led him gently aside. He had watched them morosely then from a distance while they began their ritual once more, shouting at them from time to time.

'Ah Scotland tradition bad Japan tradition,' muttered the officer who had stayed behind in the club-house to keep the Major company, and he had looked quite upset about something or other.

This man who had tried to stand in the way of the golf balls was the fellow who had now launched into a passionate discourse. Although, his companions explained, he had mastered several Western languages 'as a mental discipline' and spoke them fluently, he declined to use them, even speaking with a foreigner … so one of his brother-officers was obliged to interpret for the Major as best he could. This book in his hand was, he explained, a text book used in schools: he began to translate what the Major supposed must be chapter headings: Tea Raising, Our Town, The Emperor, Healthy Body, Persimmons, Great Japan, Cherry Blossom, Getting Up Early, The Sun and the Wind, Loyal Behaviour … and so on. ('Charming,' said the Major, 'but I don't think I quite …') These subjects in book were designed to make good loyal Japanese citizen working hard for good of Japanese nation!

The officer at the Major's elbow, his eyes (no doubt refuelled by the *saké*) smouldering more fiercely than ever, was now reading excitedly from the chapter on Military Loyalty, only pausing occasionally to aim a look of hatred and loathing at the Major. 'The object of lesson is to arouse Loyalty-feeling and foster purpose of self-sacrificing for Emperor. He tells story of how in war with China our soldiers fall into ambush at dead of night and enemy fire on them at close range. Instead of cowardly retreating they are full of Self-Sacrifice-feeling and rush on and Bugler Kikuchi, who badly wounded, keep bugle to lips and sound bugle with dying breath …' ('Well, upon my word …' said the Major.)

'If at any time Emperor give command, he who is Japanese must bravely advance to battle-place. When he has reach battle-place he must carefully obey command of superior officer. Bugler Kikuchi, who offer life, perform duty nobly and manifest magnificent Loyalty-feeling to Emperor!'

The Major, not used to squatting for long periods, was becoming decidedly stiff in the joints and felt it was time to return to his hotel and sleep off the *saké* he had consumed. But the officer at his elbow kept on and on reading from the school text book. Presently, he had finished reading the chapter on Persimmons and was declaiming exultantly from that on Great Japan. At length, however, he was quelled by his brother officers

who wanted to say something to the Major, they had a most sincere request to make of him. Would he kindly give them permission to sing old school song?

'Why, certainly!' said the Major, unable to think what a Japanese old school song might sound like (perhaps a chorus suggesting a whole flock of wading-birds standing in a lonely Siberian river).

But no, the Major had not understood. They wanted to sing *his* old school song. 'You go perhaps to famous academy like Eton and …' The officers groped for a name and consulted each other … 'Eton and Harromachi.'

'Something like those but smaller,' agreed the Major cautiously. 'Mine was called Sandhall's.' The young officers looked very pleased at this information and, smiling at the Major, rolled the word on their palates to savour it. And so it was that, in due course, after a great number of rehearsals and false starts, the Major's old school song, sung by one light, not very certain tenor and a chorus of wading-birds which included even the officer with the burning eyes, had begun to echo out over the lonely expanses of Manchuria.

'Alma mater te bibamus,
Tui calices poscamus,
Hanc sententiam dicamus
Floreat Sand … ha! … ha! … lia!'

Now, although he was at war with them, the Major, sitting beside his friend Mr Wu, could not help but think of the young officers with pleasure. The Major admired their idealism: what splendid young chaps they were! But at the same time one had to admit that their National Spirit had its disquieting side: he had felt it even at the time: he felt it all the more strongly now. One expects a patriotic spirit from military officers, of course. The British officer, though less voluble on the subject, was probably no less determined to do his duty. But what had struck the Major was that *even in peacetime* the entire Japanese nation seemed to be imbued with this fervour. Later in that same year he had visisted the vast Mitsui industrial and mining centre at Miike in Kyushu and had seen other signs of the nationalistic spirit which pervaded Japan. He had seen, for example, the entire staff of a factory, several hundred men, bow down three times in the direction of the palace in Tokyo. He had been shown a laboratory where special phosphate pills were prepared to make the miners work harder, each man being given a pill to swallow before he went down the mine-shaft. And if it had been like that in Japan in 1937 what must it be like now that the country was at war with the British Empire and America? The Major uttered a gloomy sigh as he climbed out of the Buick. For in the meantime they had arrived.

While the Major had been engrossed in his melancholy thoughts they had entered the maze of Chinese streets which lie between Bencoolen Street and Beach Road. They had only reached their destination, it transpired, to the extent that the Buick would no longer fit into the streets along which their route lay. The Major found himself following Mr Wu down a series of very narrow and strong-smelling alleys until, beaming and murmuring: 'This way, please,' his host led him into an amazingly dingy restaurant. It was deserted except for a rickshaw coolie who sat, barefoot, on a bench, his knees to his ears, quickly shovelling fried *mee* from a bowl propped against his lower lip into his mouth. An elderly woman mopping the floor paused to gaze impassively at the Major. Chuckling, Mr Wu led the way upstairs. But even as he climbed the stairs the Major had to deal with a final disquieting recollection from his visit to Japan. One of the young officers had told him that the readiness of the Japanese to die for their country may be compared to the ants in the 'Japanese Alps' which, when threatened by fire, mass themselves round it and extinguish it with their burning bodies so that it will not destroy their nests. Had not the Japanese infantry defied the Russian machine-guns at Port Arthur in exactly such a way? 'But surely no one is threatening your nest,' the Major had replied. The officer, after a moment's pause, had explained ominously that an attempt to deprive Japan of raw materials and markets was just such a threat.

The room into which Mr Wu was now ushering the Major was densely crowded and very, very hot. The table to which they were shown was already occupied, at least in the sense that a young Chinese was sprawled over it in a stupor, whether the result of weariness or narcotics it was hard to tell. He was swiftly dragged away, however, and the table was given a swift polish with a damp cloth. It was evident that Mr Wu was a respected client. Meanwhile, the Major had been unable to resist putting to Mr Wu that same question which had been gnawing at his mind earlier (and apparently, elsewhere in Singapore, had been disturbing the peace of mind of the Governor, and of other prominent citizens): what would be the response of the Chinese, Indian and Malayan communities to the invasion?

Mr Wu, who had been smiling cheerfully, became grave instantly. The Major, unable to hear what he was saying because of the noise from the other tables, craned forward, but he still could not make out what it was, though Mr Wu's round face grew steadily longer as he spoke. Ah, now he was looking cheerful again, thank heaven for that!

It soon became clear, however, that Mr Wu's change of mood derived from the preparations being made for their meal rather than the state of the Colony … a rickety gas-burner connected to a rubber pipe had been set on the table and lit. On top of it was set a concave metal ring forming a bowl which was swimming with a clear broth. Then the gas jet was turned up so that blue flame roared out of the open funnel at the top of the metal bowl and the soup inside it began to bubble.

‘We call ah steam-boat,’ explained Mr Wu.

‘No wonder it’s so hot up here,’ thought the Major who was suffering from the heat. Similar blue flames roared at other tables and the noise from the men sitting around them was deafening. He sipped the hot tea which had been set before him and longed for a cold beer. A young waitress who had joined them at the table busied herself with chopsticks, picking morsels of raw meat, chicken and fish off a plate and dropping them into the seething soup. When they were cooked she fished them out and dropped them now into the Major’s bowl, now into Mr Wu’s. The Major, anxious to be polite, struggled to maintain a conversation on fire-fighting of which it was all he could do to make out his own words, let alone those of Mr Wu.

The noise from the other tables continued to grow in volume. The Major was astonished; he was accustomed to think of the Chinese as quiet and well-behaved but these Chinese were shouting their heads off. Mr Wu himself appeared not to notice his fellow-diners until the Major drew his attention to them. He had to shout to make himself heard … Who were these young men at the other tables?

‘National anti-enemy society of ah Kuomintang!’ shouted Mr Wu. ‘They drink ah whisky for defeating ah enemy!’ And he roared with laughter while the Major had a look. Mr Wu was quite right: each young Chinese had a half-bottle of whisky planted on the table in front of him and from time to time he took a swig from it to moisten his gullet before resuming his shouting.

The evening pursued its course. The heat and the noise grew steadily more acute. This, the Major decided, his brain reeling, could only be a local chapter meeting of the Youth Blood and Iron Traitor-Exterminating Corps. He could not help but make a dubious comparison between these wild and vociferous young men and the disciplined Japanese officers he had met. What chance would they have? Why, none at all. Their eyes bulged, their faces grew red, though not as red as the Major’s, and the veins stood out on their temples. Many of them wore string singlets over their stomachs and as they got drunker they lifted them to cool their navels. Presently, tired of shouting their lungs out at each other they gathered round the Major and Mr Wu instead and shouted their lungs out at them.

Meanwhile, unconcerned, Mr Wu, continued to pick delicately with his chopsticks in the bubbling soup, searching for choice fragments of squid and sea-slug to drop in the Major’s bowl. Only when he had finished this search did he notice the Major’s harassed expression. Then he tried to explain something but the Major, deafened, could not hear. Mr Wu turned to the shouting young men and with a barely perceptible frown murmured something under his breath. Instantly, the young men stopped shouting and fell back, watching the remainder of the meal in eerie silence from their own tables.

‘They make you member society,’ explained Mr Wu genially. ‘Society call ah Prum Brossom Fists Society.’

‘Good heavens!’ exclaimed the Major, touched. ‘Please thank them on my behalf. He wondered why the name of the society should stir some distant recollection in his mind. It was only later that it came back to him. Was it not something to do with the Boxer Rising in 1900? Surely one of the factions pledged to drive foreigners out of China had been called the Plum Blossom Fists Society? He was almost certain. He must remember to ask Mr Wu.

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‘My dear Herringport, nothing could give me greater pleasure now that your country has entered the War than to accede to your request.’ Thus it was that Brooke-Popham, ambushed by Ehrendorf as he was leaving a conference, gave him the opportunity to satisfy his most pressing need: to leave the city in which Joan lived without delay. Brooke-Popham had spoken in what was, for that kindly gentleman, a somewhat surly tone: he was tired of being ambushed by people; he was tired of conferences, too; he was tired of the War, even, although it had only just begun. In a few days from now, however, someone else would be stepping into his shoes as Commander-in-Chief and he would be able to return to Britain. Not a moment too soon, as far as he was concerned.

Noticing that Ehrendorf was looking somewhat taken aback by the brusqueness of his tone, Brooke-Popham relented and placing a friendly hand on the young man’s shoulder he walked with him a few paces down the corridor for, after all, this was the charming young Herringport, not one of the aggressive blighters on the War Council.

‘What would you suggest, Jack?’ he said over his shoulder. ‘This young man wants a closer view of the action.’

‘I should think a spell on Heath’s staff in KL would be the place for a ringside seat,’ came the amiable reply.

‘Good idea! Clear it with Percival and Heath, will you? I take it,’ he went on, this time to Ehrendorf, ‘that your own chaps have no objection. After all, now that we’ve got allies we don’t want to get off on the wrong footing with them, do we?’ And the Commander-in-Chief strolled on, still with a paternal hand on Ehrendorf’s shoulder but with a wary eye open lest one of the Resident Minister’s minions should choose this moment to pounce on him. ‘By the way, Jack,’ he said over his shoulder again. ‘Have you come across a fellow called Simson? No? Obsessed with tank-traps. Says Japanese tanks could be through Malaya like Carter’s Little Liver Pills and we’d have no way of stopping ’m. Still, one never knows, he could be right. One must be fair, after all. What d’you think? All I can say is, thank heaven that’s Percival’s pidgin! Nothing to do with me. Quite a

presentable looking fellow, actually. Says he's an Engineer. No reason to doubt it, of course …'

Seeing that the Commander-in-Chief's attention had moved on to another problem, Ehrendorf seized the opportunity to escape, though not before having made swift arrangements with another member of Brooke-Popham's train for the necessary documents. Then he hastened out to where his car was waiting … but on the way, something rather curious happened. He had been aware for some days of a growing strain running in a line down the centre of his body. This strain, since his last meeting with Joan, had become steadily stronger. Suddenly now on his way to the staff-car (it was most unexpected) he split into two Ehrendorfs. While one Ehrendorf gave brisk instructions to the driver, who seemed not to have noticed anything unusual, the other took his seat in the back, shaking his head sadly, as if to say: 'It doesn't matter in the least where you tell him to drive you, because one place is exactly like another.' And while the first Ehrendorf, ignoring this, tried to decide whether to send a last 'final letter' to Joan (there had already been one or two), perhaps mentioning that he was 'off to the Front' (a slight exaggeration since the HQ of 111 Indian Corps, where he was going, though the centre of operational command for northern Malaya, was actually situated in reasonable comfort and security in Kuala Lumpur, but never mind) and wishing her well for the future with Matthew or the guy with the stammer, the second Ehrendorf continued to watch him with detachment and contempt, as if to suggest that the writing of such a letter was quite as useless as any other course of action he could take and a sign of weakness into the bargain, the aping of noble sentiments which he did not feel in the least.

Passing across Anderson Bridge the car's progress was slowed by a convoy of armoured troop-carriers; glancing down at the river, Ehrendorf saw the cluster of *sampans* and *tongkangs* riding the slime: here entire families of Chinese were fated to spend their lives. For a moment the misery of this waterborne population caused the two Ehrendorfs to merge into one again. But they separated once more on the other side of the bridge. One can hardly be expected constantly, day in and day out, to measure one's own slender but personal misery against the collective misery of the world! That is asking too much. And about that letter, would it really be self-pitying to send Joan a note wishing her future happiness with Kate's Human Bean, who was also his own best friend, after all? Yet the truth was (was it not?) that under the guise of these silken good wishes he would really have liked to send Joan a rasping sarcasm. Admit it! Thus brooded the two Ehrendorfs sitting in the back of the car.

When he had returned to his apartment in Market Street, he packed his kit and left it by the door; then he wandered aimlessly from sitting-room to bedroom and back again, now and again picking up a small object (a bottle of ink, a comb, a cotton reel of khaki thread), inspecting it and putting it down again. He stared for a long time at a section of the wall by the window where the whitewash, thickly applied, had begun to flake away: he examined it with great attention as if for some hidden significance, but at length, with a shrug of his shoulders he moved away, unable to make anything of it. He paused to look down into Market Street for a moment. Normally this was one of his favourite occupations: he loved the smell of cummin, cinnamon and allspice which drifted up to his window when sacks and kegs of spices were being unloaded at the spice merchant's below. On the other side of the street were the money-lenders' shops: there Chettyars in white cheesecloth *dhotis* dozed over their accounts in dim interiors, lounging or squatting on polished wooden platforms while they waited for business, or poring over ledgers at ankle-high desks whose wood was as dark and gleaming as their own skins. They reminded Ehrendorf of somnolent alligators waiting until chance should bring them a meal on the current of passers-by flowing down the street. He smiled at the thought but the street, too, had grown oppressive and he moved on, this time picking up a snapshot of himself and his brothers and sisters. On an impulse he put it in an envelope and scribbled Matthew's name and address on it: he explored his mind for some friendly comment he might write on the back of it but could find nothing, his mind was perfectly empty. In the end, unable to think of anything suitable, he simply sealed it, stuck a stamp on it and put it in his pocket. 'What time is it?' he asked himself aloud. An overwhelming desire to sleep came over him, although he had slept soundly all night and most of the preceding afternoon. 'This won't do at all. If I leave now I could catch an early train and be in KL by …' Instead he picked up a newspaper and began to read an article on the developing friendship between Chinese and Indian ARP wardens. 'Perhaps I should eat something?'

'… This little incident is typical of the comradeship now to be found every day of the week in the streets of our city among Asiatic and European volunteers in the "Passive Defence" services …' What little incident? Ehrendorf, though he began doggedly to read the article again, was unable to find 'the little incident'. He even counted the pages of the newspaper; he must have lost a page somewhere. But no, it was all there. He threw it aside. What did it matter? Should he go to sleep again or should he go to the railway station? He went into the kitchen and opened his refrigerator: it contained eggs, milk, a lettuce, some corned beef on a saucer (frozen on to it), a boiled potato that for some reason had turned a dark grey colour, some beetroot and the manuscript of a novel he was writing about a gifted young American from Kansas City who goes to Oxford on a scholarship and there, having fallen in love with an English girl who surrounds herself with cynical, sophisticated people, goes to the dogs, forgetting the sincere, warm-hearted American girl whose virginity he had made away with while crossing the Atlantic on a Cunard liner … et cetera … 'How could I write such rubbish?' Still, he could not quite bring himself to tear it up … ('All I need now is the sincere, warm-hearted American girl.') He left the novel where it was but transferred the food to the table, having fried the eggs and the grey boiled potato.

Then he began to eat. He still did not feel in the least hungry but his Calvinist conscience would not allow him to leave the food to spoil while he was away from Singapore. It would have been a better idea, he realized, to give it to some hungry Singaporean but he was unable, in his present frame of mind, to face the problem of finding and communicating with a suitable recipient. He ate his way remorselessly through the food on the table, trying to make himself belch from time to time to lessen the strain. When he had finished he obliged himself, as an extra penance, to eat his way through a wedge of cake he discovered in a biscuit tin. As he ate, taking frequent swigs of milk to reduce the cake to a gruel he could swallow, he mused on the natural tendency, observable in human affairs, for things to go wrong, a law which in his blind optimism he had not perceived until this moment. Since nobody else appeared to have given it much thought, either, he felt justified in christening this discovery: Ehrendorf's Second Law. It asserted: 'In human affairs things tend inevitably to go wrong.' Or to put it another way: 'The human situation, in general or in particular, is slightly worse (ignoring an occasional hiccup in the graph) at any given moment than at any preceding moment.' This notion caused him to smile for a moment: he must pass it on to Matthew. The reflection which caused him to wince immediately after having smiled (namely, that as Matthew was a rival he had most likely lost not only Joan but his best friend into the bargain), he saw merely as a demonstration of the universal application to Ehrendorf's Second Law.

Ehrendorf, having overcome with great difficulty a desire to retire to bed and sleep for several more hours, finally persuaded himself to take the evening train to Kuala Lumpur: it was Thursday, II December. By the time he set out he was already very tired; he also felt bloated and ill from the unwanted food he had consumed. The cavernous Railway Station in Keppel Road was already thronged with bored, weary or resigned-looking troops: British, Australian, Indian and Ghurka; their kit and rifles lay piled haphazardly; men shouted orders but without apparently diminishing the chaos, causing Ehrendorf, who for some weeks had been contemplating the conversion of his novel into an epic of Tolstoyan dimensions, to wonder whether war was of interest to anyone but the commanders who were conducting it. Was it not, for the troops themselves, a matter of standing around for hours on end speechless with boredom, perhaps with now and then a moment of terror?

The train, when he succeeded in finding it, was already crammed with troops. He forced his way into a first-class compartment with a number of British officers who eyed him with hostility; one of them reluctantly removed his kit from a seat by the window, the only place unoccupied. It was extremely hot in the compartment and the atmosphere of ill-will among its occupants showed no sign of dissipating, nor the train any sign of moving out of the station. The insignia of the Federated Malay States Railway, palm-trees and a lion, had been engraved on the window beside Ehrendorf: he gazed at it, thinking of the vanished comfort and security of earlier days in Malaya, and found it beautiful. At last the train began to move; they crept out of the station, passing the General Hospital and the old Lunatic Asylum on their right and then curved away across the island towards the Causeway. Almost immediately the redtiled roofs of Singapore gave way to jungle, so astonishingly dense that one might not have known that a great city lay just on the other side of it a few hundred yards away; after the jungle, mangrove swamps, a wretched Malay village scattered with rusting tin cans, a banana grove, a rubber smallholding or two, a few frail-looking papaya trees, then more jungle and mangrove until they reached the Causeway and the flashing water on either side.

Once out of the dilapidated streets of Johore Bahru the jungle returned, a solid green wall in which it was hard to distinguish individual leaves and fronds; Ehrendorf had the impression of travelling through an interminable dark green corridor. Presently, it grew dark and began to rain heavily, making it necessary to shut the windows. The heat quickly grew intolerable. The only illumination was a single light-bulb painted blue in deference to the black-out: in the faint glow that it cast it was barely possible to make out the faces of the other men in the compartment. Time passed. The rain stopped and it was possible to open the windows again. When, for no apparent reason, they halted, Ehrendorf could smell the steam from the locomotive which hung in the saturated air and refused to dissipate.

They crept forward again, then stopped. A man ran back along the train blowing a whistle and shouting 'Air-raid!' his feet crunching noisily on the cinders as he passed. One of the officers switched off the blue light and the others groped for their helmets. Nothing happened; they sat in silence, waiting. The night sounds of the jungle rose in volume around them, eerie and frightening. Something, perhaps a moth, brushed against Ehrendorf's face in the darkness and he flailed at it in sudden horror. Still nothing happened. Feeling drowsy he leaned his head against the side of the coach, his helmet tilted to form a comfortable support. After a wait that seemed interminable the train began cautiously to advance once more.

Ehrendorf slept now, shaken this way and that by the motion of the train. A smell of tobacco, remembered from his childhood, flirted with his scarcely conscious mind, a smell not of burning tobacco but of the empty cigarette tins his father used to give him. In his dream he thought: 'How close we are to things when we smell them!' Then his restless mind meandered away in a long, meaningless series of half-thoughts about Joan. He saw her walking ahead of him in a blue cotton dress, flaring and fading rhythmically in time with the motion of the train. 'It would never have worked in any case. We had nothing in common.'

The train had stopped, evidently in some small station, perhaps Segamat or Gemas. There were no lights on the platform so it was impossible to make out. There was a storm grumbling nearby: lightning flickered over the surrounding tree tops. He wondered what time it was. A flash of lightning illuminated the compartment

for an instant and he saw his travelling companions; they were still silent but no longer sitting erect: now they slumped as if mysteriously gassed. Another train travelling in the opposite direction had stopped beside their own. One of them began to move: at first he thought it was the one he was in but it proved to be the other: a brief, sickening impression of immobility took hold of him as he realized. One darkened compartment after another slipped past. And then, surprisingly, a compartment which by comparison with the rest seemed brightly lit. Ehrendorf, still drugged with sleep, glimpsed a little cluster of illuminated brigadiers poring over a map which they had spread on a table between them. He sat up quickly, but the other train had already vanished into the darkness.

'Wasn't that General Heath in the middle?' he asked the man opposite him, but there was no reply. Heath was in command of 111 Corps. After all, he mused, things might not be going too badly if Heath was paying a visit to Singapore.

36

Dupigny had spent the past two days very pleasantly in George Town, the only town of consequence on the island of Penang. He had come here partly because he felt he needed a change from Singapore, partly in the hope of borrowing some money from a French acquaintance. Although, as it had transpired, he had not succeeded in borrowing the money, in all other respects his visit to Penang had turned out well. He had managed, despite his threadbare clothing, to persuade the management of the Eastern and Oriental Hotel that Monsieur Ballereau, the French Consul in Singapore whom Dupigny considered, for no particular reason, his sworn enemy, would redeem all his bills and chits … a decidedly satisfactory state of affairs, given the excellence of the hotel's cuisine. Now the problem which was exercising him as he strolled along the esplanade giving himself an appetite for a substantial lunch in prospect, was this: would his residence at the E and O be a sufficient sign of affluence for him to buy new clothes at a superior outfitter's on credit? In normal times a European would have expected to be given credit in any case without difficulty, merely signing a chit to be redeemed in due course. But of late things had been growing more difficult. Dupigny had already been rebuffed more than once in his efforts to fit himself out in a suitable manner.

This was a thorny problem but he did not intend to let it spoil his stroll. This promenade, he considered, had something of the atmosphere of a seaside resort in Normandy … Deauville, say, or Cabourg. Here, on one rounded elbow of the island, the town hall and municipal offices presided in peaceful dignity over a stretch of open ground giving on to the ruined earthworks of Fort Cornwallis. In Deauville, of course, there would have been a bracing smell of the sea and the Tricolour would have been galloping on a flag-staff; here there was a flag-staff, certainly, but the Union Jack hung limp from it in the humid heat. No, it was not bracing here, far from it, but by half closing your eyes and very vigorously exercising your imagination you might, for a moment or two, think yourself in a tropical Balbec on your way to meet some darkskinned little Albertine.

George Town, he was thinking, as he followed the elbow of the coast road where it turned sharply to head back south-west along Weld Quay towards the ferry, though not the most exciting place in the world, was certainly one of the most peaceful, even with the war so close. Yes, it even seemed peaceful this morning when Weld Quay was thronged with Chinese and Indians, come to watch the Japanese bombers attacking Butterworth across the water as they had on the previous day. Undoubtedly there had not been such excitement in Penang, apart from some race riots between Chinese and Indians, in the hundred years since the government of the Straits Settlements had passed to Singapore … But Dupigny hardly had time to finish this thought: the next moment he looked out to sea, looked again, hesitated, then began to run.

It is unusual to see someone running in the tropics; now and then Europeans, in defiance of the heat, may be seen playing football, cricket or some other sport, but not running the way Dupigny was (as if his life depended upon it, as perhaps it did). People turned to stare at him as he raced back the way he had come towards the ruined walls and grassy banks of Fort Cornwallis. At first he shouted at them, but they paid no attention to him; he decided immediately it was useless, a waste of breath, so he ran on in silence, passing a Chinese ARP warden who realized immediately why he was running and started shouting wildly at a little group of Indians nearby, trying to marshal them in one direction or another. Although he tried to point in the direction of what was approaching from the mainland as he ran, it made no difference: one or two of the strollers even grinned at each other at the sight of a middleaged European running for all he was worth in the steaming midday heat. Now Dupigny paid no attention to them, hardly even saw them. He ran and ran and, wiry though he was, the sweat poured off his face and neck.

Here and there the crowds were so dense that there was hardly room to move, but Dupigny shoved people rudely aside in his determination to get where he was going, too breathless to apologize, though again he tried to point across the water. One or two of those he shoved aside shouted angrily after him; nobody cares to be barged into the gutter while taking a stroll. An elderly English gentleman shook a walking-stick after him: this was the sort of ill-mannered fellow one found coming out East in recent years: not enough breeding to wrap in a postage stamp! But still Dupigny ran and ran for his life. There was an expression of fierce concentration on his face as he ran, looking neither right nor left, head down, elbows working. The sole of one of his shoes, which he had been obliged by poverty to wear ever since leaving Saigon and which he had been

nursing anxiously for some weeks, now detached itself and began to flap ridiculously. But he did not even stop to attend to this, merely kicked the shoe off as he was running because already, above the thudding of his own pulse in his ears, he could hear the drone of the approaching bombers.

As he drew near the corner of Light Street where the seafront turned towards the fort and the esplanade, the crowds became thinner and several people were looking up at the sky, their attention drawn by the steadily increasing sound of motors. One or two of them, concerned as much to see Dupigny running as by the thought that these approaching aeroplanes might be a source of danger quickened their pace, but with the air of people who do not want to be thought ridiculous. Dupigny ran on with open mouth and staring eyes, for now it seemed to him that he was running in a dream and in semi-darkness through which there penetrated, wriggling into his consciousness like little silver worms, the sound of ARP whistles, followed by the undulating wail of the siren from the roof of the police station.

He was no more than sixty yards from the protection of the green banks of earth by the fort but moving in slow motion. He ran and ran but the fort seemed to come no closer; the muscles of his thighs no longer obeyed him. Half-way across the intervening open space he stumbled and fell on the gravel. He could no longer hear the engines but looking up at last he saw that one of the bombers flying very low was almost on top of him and appeared to be hovering over him like a bird of prey, blotting out the sun. Getting to his feet he staggered forward again in desperation and finding himself on the edge of a grassy bank of earth he hurled himself over it and tumbled head over heels down and down into the shady depths of a gully full of sand and stones. And as he did so he was followed by a great tidal wave of sound that swept over his head and tore savagely at the flag hanging limply from the flag-staff a few yards away.

He lay there quaking for some moments with his head in his hands, flinching as one aeroplane after another roared overhead, each one followed by a series of resonant explosions which shook the ground and created a miniature landslide of pebbles a few inches in front of his nose. Simultaneously with the explosions there came what might have been the pattering of fingernails on a metal table, very thin and trivial compared with the violent beating of big drums and the grinding of masonry. Machine-guns!

Again and again he heard the crump of falling bombs. Some of them fell very close, and with each bomb there was the same dreadful shudder of the earth and a trickle of gravel by his face. A spider, horribly agile, galloped away in a panic. When he looked up he could see that the godowns along Swettenham and Victoria Piers were blazing briskly and beyond, on the peaceful and shining waters towards the mainland, smoke was rising from several of the anchored vessels, swelling from slender trunks into canopies that hung over them, giving them the appearance of monstrous elms.

For some minutes, while he recovered a little from the effort he had made, he lay where he was, thinking of nothing; then he climbed unsteadily out of his refuge. Without considering where he was going, though perhaps with some dazed notion that he might escape from this catastrophe by taking the electric tram which ran from the railway jetty along the Dato Kramat Road to Ayer Itam Village, he began to wander back the way he had come. But, of course, such an escape was out of the question: even if there had been anyone left to drive a tram the tracks were cratered and the overhead wires lay tangled on the ground amid the rubble of masonry.

Despite the crackle of burning buildings and the shouts and screams of those who had been injured, to Dupigny it suddenly seemed very quiet as he retraced his steps towards the Railway Jetty. It seemed that it was only a moment earlier that he had been running in the opposite direction; yet of the crowds through which he had had to force his way there was no sign: they had melted away mysteriously leaving only, dotted on the pavement here and there, bundles of clothes: from many of these bundles, however, blood was flowing.

One of the bundles was of pure white muslin and from it there issued such a lake of blood that Dupigny found himself marvelling that the human body could contain that quantity. He was obliged to make a considerable detour to avoid splashing through it, which, considering that he had lost one shoe, he believed he might find disagreeable. But even the sight of the blood nauseated him and he was obliged to shift his gaze to something more comforting: in the event this was the smoke pouring prettily out of the window of a burning building across the street.

He took a closer look. This time he noticed that the smoke did not have a long slender trunk and a canopy like an elm, as with the ships burning in the anchorage, but a short, fat stalk like a cauliflower. And also like a cauliflower this smoke seemed quite green below, billowing out into white flowerets above. Someone was shouting at him from the window.

No. There was someone at the window but she was dead, hanging out of it with gracefully trailing arms in the manner of someone in a rowing-boat idly trailing fingers in the water. At the same time there was someone shouting at him from the road: a short, fat man with no neck: his red, flustered face appeared to be set directly on his shoulders, his arms emerging from just below his ears.

‘Come on, now, I want you to take care of me,’ he was shouting. ‘You’ll have to shift things so that I can drive my car. Come on. Yes, you. You’re the only person here so you’ll have to do.’ He was standing beside a little Ford without a windscreen. As Dupigny made no move he added pleadingly: ‘There’s a good fellow. You aren’t going to leave me in the lurch, are you? Those bloody bombers may come back any minute.’

‘Very well,’ said Dupigny and having brushed the glass from the front seat he got in beside the fat man, who said: ‘No, no. You must crank!’ and produced a starting-handle which he handed to Dupigny. Dupigny got

out again and with much difficulty found the hole in which to insert the end of the starting-handle. 'Ready?' But he could barely see the man in the driving-seat for the smoke which was drifting around them from the burning building nearby.

The motor fired immediately and Dupigny got back into the car. As he did so he noticed that a picture advertising a round tin of Capstan cigarettes had been painted on the side of the vehicle. 'Do you have a cigarette, please?' he asked, but there was no reply. They set off jerkily down the road following the tram-lines, weaving in and out between craters, bodies and rubble … in places, because of the drifting smoke, it was impossible to see what lay ahead. The fat man drove, muttering to himself and tears cascaded down his plump cheeks, but whether they were caused by grief, alarm or simply the smoke it was impossible to say. Now their way was blocked by a mess of twisted girders and high-tension wires. The fat man peered ahead uncertainly.

'Drive up on the pavement.'

'But that is against the law,' said the fat man unhappily. 'We must go back.'

'Drive on the pavement,' repeated Dupigny harshly, 'or we'll never get out of this place. Go forward. I see where you can cross the storm-drain.'

They drove on, managing with inches to spare to find a way through. Looking to his right Dupigny searched for some sign of life from the fire station in Chulia Street but all he could see was the unbroken curtain of smoke: perhaps the station itself had been hit. Turning inland to follow Maxwell Road they saw that a hysterical crowd had gathered around the dead and wounded in the market, which itself was a shambles in which carcasses of animals and humans had become indistinguishable.

'We'll never get through there,' whimpered the fat man. 'They'll kill us like dogs.'

'Don't be stupid. Drive up Magazine Road instead. It looks more clear.'

At a junction with another road they crossed over the tramlines again. Here there was not so much damage and the overhead cables had not been brought down. Macalister Road was crowded with excited people but otherwise the way was clear. Presently they turned north, then west on to Burmah Road. Now they found themselves in almost deserted countryside. 'Where are we going?' Dupigny wondered.

Suddenly the fat man stamped on the brake pedal and the car drifted sideways, locked tyres screaming, until it came to a halt by some sugar cane. Dupigny could see no reason for stopping. The road ahead was empty. But the fat man had bounded out of the car and with his little arms working vigorously on his rotund body he scurried across the road and plunged into the sugar cane. The foliage swallowed him immediately and he gave no further sign of life.

'*Ah!*' Dupigny now saw why he had taken to his heels. A two-engined Mitsubishi bomber had crept into view following the coastline in a westerly direction but already beginning to turn inland towards the stalled motor-car where Dupigny was sitting. It was flying very slowly and very low. He could see every detail of it. Its wing dipped and it began to turn on a wide curve that would bring it back over George Town and the shipping once more. Dupigny sat there too tired to move and watched the nose of the aeroplane coming towards him, looking, he thought, like the cruel head of a pike. For a moment he could see the four bomb-doors under the belly of the plane and one wheel, half tucked into its undercarriage like an acorn in its cup. Now its camouflaged surface was hard to follow against the dark green flank of Penang Hill but then, as it banked more steeply, the underneath of the plane was eclipsed and the sunlight flared first on one facet of the glass cockpit, then on another, to be picked up in turn by the machine-gun turret just above and behind the wing; as the glare died Dupigny saw the dark silhouette of the gunner's head and of the gun itself with its barrel swivelling and he realized that the pilot was banking to give the gunner a view of the ground. Now he, too, felt like running for the sugar cane but he knew it was too late: he sat perfectly still, hoping that the gunner would think the car was abandoned. The bomber came curving nearer, only a few feet above the church and market at Pulau Tikus and the rooftops along Cantonment Road. Dust and gravel spurted from the road and seemed to hang there printed on his retina like a formation of stalagmites. A great roar of engines and a draught of wind rocked the car and then the plane had passed over, leaving him with a singing in his ears. Silence fell again. Nothing stirred. Dupigny continued to sit there where he was. In the glove compartment there was a tin of Capstan cigarettes and a box of matches. Dupigny lit one and waited. There was no sign of the fat man.

After he had finished the cigarette, he put the gear lever in neutral and got out the starting-handle again. When the motor was running he sounded the horn, waited for a while, then drove away, thinking that he might find some sheltered and isolated place to stay until the 'all clear' sounded. He was obliged to drive slowly because in the absence of a windscreen he could not see properly. Soon, however, he was on the coast road to Tanjong Bungah. Several civilian cars, an Army lorry and a bren-gun carrier passed him, driving quickly in the direction of George Town. He saw a sign then for the Swimming Club and turned off the road into some trees on the right, parking the car in the shade of one of them.

The Swimming Club's doors and shutters were open but it seemed deserted except for a frightened looking Chinese at the bar. Dupigny ordered a beer and told the boy to serve it on the verandah. While he was waiting he paused to examine a couple of framed photographs on the wall. One of them, dating from about 1910 to judge by the clothes, showed the ladies and gentlemen of the Penang Swimming Club attending what was evidently an annual prize-giving. The ladies, wearing long dresses and broad-brimmed Edwardian hats

swagged with silk and taffeta, sat demurely in the foreground beside a small table laden with silver cups and trophies. The gentlemen, meanwhile, were disposed in studied little groups here and there at the windows and on the verandah of the club-house, suggesting the crowd-scene of a musical comedy when the members of the chorus in the background talk to each other with animation, roar with laughter or slap their thighs with delight … but all in silence, while some other matter is being dealt with by the leading players in the foreground. 'Ah, what a great deal can change even in a place like Penang in thirty years!'

The other photograph, from about the same period, also showed a group of ladies and gentlemen, assembled this time for a picnic, perhaps. The padre was there looking young and vigorous, a watch-chain visible against his black waistcoat and with a white sun-helmet on his head. The ladies were still sitting in the rickshaws that had brought them; but only one coolie had remained to appear in the picture and there he was, still gripping the shafts as if he had only just trundled his fair cargo up. The European standing beside the rickshaw had reached out a hand as the photograph was being taken and forced the coolie's head down so that only his straw hat and not his face should be visible in the picture.

With a sigh Dupigny stretched out on a comfortable rattan chair on the verandah, musing on the confident assumption of superiority embodied in that hand forcing the coolie to hide his face. He himself had often seen Europeans in the East treating the Asiatics in that way in his earlier days but now it looked … well, slightly incongruous when seen with the modern eye of 1941. Imperceptibly ideas had been changing, the relative power of the races had been changing, and not only in the British colonies but in the French and Dutch as well. Even without Vichy it would have been attempting the impossible to continue governing Indo-China from Hanoi for very much longer. Both he and Catroux had been aware of it at the time without acknowledging it. Whatever happened with the Japanese the old colonial life in the East, the European's hand on the coolie's straw hat, was finished. The boy had brought his beer. He took the chit and, not without pleasure, signed it 'Ballereau'. The Chinese boy had lingered on the verandah looking east to the vast canopy of smoke that hung over George Town.

37

'In human affairs things tend inevitably to go wrong. Things are slightly worse at any given moment than at any preceding moment.' This proposition, known as the Second Law, its discoverer now had the opportunity of seeing demonstrated on a remarkably generous scale. His vantage point for watching its operation was 111 Corps Headquarters in Kuala Lumpur where a strong smell of incipient disaster hung in the air, like the smoke that hangs in a theatre after the firing of a blank cartridge. Not only, he discovered, had a great deal gone wrong before his arrival but almost every message which now arrived in the Operations room signified that something else had just gone wrong, with the probability of more to follow.

Ehrendorf had arrived at 111 Corps Headquarters shortly after nine o'clock in the morning, very weary after his night in the train. His arrival coincided almost to the minute with a crucial development in the struggle for northern Malaya, for General Murray-Lyon, commander of the 11th Division which had been given the principal rôle in its defence, had just telephoned. Murray-Lyon had been trying to contact General Heath, to request permission to withdraw from the preordained defensive position he had occupied at Jitra. He was afraid that unless he did so the 11th Division might be destroyed. General Heath, however, could not be found: Ehrendorf had not been deceived when in the middle of the night he had seen that illuminated compartment with its little cluster of brightly lit officers around General Heath vanishing into the jungle darkness. Heath had gone to Singapore to confer with General Percival. Ehrendorf also learned on arrival that Japanese bombers had given Penang and Butterworth a pounding on the previous day. Since there were no ack-ack guns on the island it had been defenceless.

'But what about the RAF at Butterworth?'

'Partly damaged, partly withdrawn to Singapore,' he was told.

Somewhat surprisingly in the circumstances Ehrendorf found that he was given a warm welcome by General Heath's staff. During the lengthy period he had spent in Singapore he had become accustomed to being treated with reserve by the British staff officers he had come across in the course of his duties, even sometimes in recent months with veiled contempt. But now he was warmly shaken by the hand, found a billet and given some breakfast. It was a little time before he realized that this was probably because he was the first American officer to be seen in KL since America had entered the war. The welcome was symbolic. Perhaps, too, since the unfortunate start to the campaign in Malaya a feeling was beginning to take root that the power of the United States might well become necessary if the Japanese were to be contained and subdued in the Pacific. It had been the habit of British officers to scoff at the Japanese Army. Had they not been battling fruitlessly with a rabble of Chinese since 1937, unable to get the upper hand? The military engagements of the last three or four days, however, had revealed that the Japanese invaders were far from being the ineffectual enemy they had expected. Finally there was another, more human reason for the warmth of Ehrendorf's welcome: he had arrived at a moment when General Heath's staff was secretly heaving a collective sigh of relief.

For a moment, half an hour earlier, it had seemed possible that in the General's absence they might

themselves have to come to a decision on Murray-Lyon's request to withdraw the 11th Division from Jitra to a new position behind the Kedah River. Only 111 Corps HQ had detailed knowledge, after all, of the grave way the situation had developed. But think of it! After a night without sleep (for in KL the lights had been burning, too, while men pored over maps) to be presented with such a dilemma! To be asked at a moment's notice when a telephone rang to sanction the abandonment of a defensive position established months, even years, in advance … and that in favour of a position not yet prepared!

No wonder, mused Ehrendorf, enjoying toast and marmalade and a welcome cup of hot coffee, that this particular potato which Murray-Lyon had just raked out of the embers and presented to HQ 111 Corps, after some moments of frenzied juggling from one hand to another should be got rid of with relief into the less sensitive palms of Malaya Command. When Murray-Lyon's request had been considered, however, and judgement passed on it by Percival and Heath in Singapore, their verdict being that the 11th Division should stand its ground and fight the battle at Jitra as planned, gloom descended on the staff once more, in time for lunch … for it had turned out that there was, after all, a drawback to passing this crucial decision on to Malaya Command, which was simply that Malaya Command had made the wrong choice. That much was clear, even to Ehrendorf who had studied the positions and managed by tea-time to get the hang of what was going on. And what he saw on the battlefield in his mind's eye as he sat eating cherry cake and drinking tea, and even enjoying them in the rather bleak sort of way of someone who considers that he might as well be dead, was everywhere the Second Law triumphant.

But even in terms of the Second Law the tribulations of the 11th Division were to be wondered at, for they had spent two whole days (while Brooke-Popham inspected his thoughts) waiting at the Siamese border under a tropical downpour for the order to spring forward and give the Japs a sock on the jaw as they were trying to land at Singora. And when Brooke-Popham had at last decided not to push forward into Siam, after all, helped out of his dilemma by the fact that it was now too late, anyway, the Japanese in the meantime having completed their landing satisfactorily, the two brigades of 11th Division (there was another brigade waiting in the wings somewhere, Ehrendorf had not yet discovered where) had trudged back to find their prepared defences at Jitra flooded out and far from 'prepared' … for the key part they were supposed to play in defending Malaya from the main Japanese thrust across the border.

What this amounted to, he was thinking as he said, yes, he would like another cup of tea, thanks, to the saturnine and upper-class young captain at his elbow, was that the British had been caught half-way between one plan and another and were in imminent danger of not succeeding with either. But in the meantime the plot had been thickening ominously elsewhere, for the column of two battalions under Lieutenant-Colonel Moorehead which was supposed to dash forward into Siam and deny the Japanese the road through the mountains from Patani by capturing the only defensible position on it: the Ledge … had not managed to do so. The Japanese had got there first. What could one say about this except that it was a pity? It was worse than a pity, it was a catastrophe, for it meant that even if the 11th Division succeeded in baling out their flooded defences, repairing the barbed wire and putting down their signals equipment in time to meet the Japanese attack, they would still have to face the prospect of having their lines of communication with the rest of the British forces severed by a Japanese column coming along that road through the mountains.

The best that one could say of the situation, as Ehrendorf saw it, was that one catastrophe (unprepared defences at Jitra) more or less cancelled out the other catastrophe (failure to secure the road through the mountains) because, after all, you could only lose Jitra to the enemy *once* and it was immaterial whether you did so by unprepared defences, or loss of a road behind you, or most generously of all, by both at the same time. Although, mused Ehrendorf, if it *were* possible to lose Jitra twice, these guys would certainly stand a good chance of doing so. All the same, they were treating him very hospitably and someone in their outfit clearly knew how to make a good cup of tea.

To make matters just a little worse, the 'prepared' position at Jitra was even at the best of times a long way from being the ideal place to make a stand, scattered as it was over a front of a dozen miles or so on each side of the main road from the Siamese border. Probing attacks by Japanese infantry and tanks had already put to flight or partly destroyed two reserve battalions sent forward to delay them, thereby rendering the defences even more shallow than they had been to begin with. Ehrendorf, whose favourite bedside reading since boyhood had been military strategy and who considered himself an unrecognized military genius obliged to fritter away his talents on diplomatic and administrative matters, shook his head over the lack of reserves; there should have another battalion of the reserve brigade (the 28th) but it had been left behind to guard the airfields at Alor Star and Sungei Patani against a possible parachute attack. There was, therefore, nothing serious in the way of reserve which could be used for a counter-attack. During the night, while he had been dozing in the train, the Japanese advance guard had attacked twice, the first time straight down the road against the position held by the Leicesters, who had succeeded in driving them back, the second time to the east of the road where they had managed to find a slight opening between the Leicesters' right flank and the Jats' left, thus threatening them both. Attempts to dislodge them and restore the integrity of the line had so far failed.

The day was unbearably hot and sultry with intermittent downpours and thunderstorms. Ehrendorf, whose digestion had barely recovered from the strain of eating up the odds and ends of food from his refrigerator in Singapore but who was still obliged to rely heavily upon eating, both as a comfort to keep up his own leaden

spirits and as a means of social contact with the staff officers of 111 Corps, by tea-time had begun to feel dangerously bloated once more. So presently, while news was circulating that the Japs had attacked again and driven yet further into the already dented line between the Leicesters and the Jats, he asked to be directed to the 'bathroom' so that he could 'wash up', a locution which caused some of his new comrades to titter vaguely while they considered this new instalment of bad news from the front. Once in the 'bathroom' he forced himself to throw up: this was a disagreeable sensation but he soon felt somewhat better and found that on his return he could manage another slice of cake and cup of tea.

Over supper, which began with rather dry *ikan merah* fried in butter with lemon, there was talk of a counter-attack, but also of straightening out the line by withdrawing the Leicesters to a position farther back along the Bata River. While drinking beer and eating a creamy chicken curry whose fire was somewhat moderated by the fresh grapefruit and papaya with which it was served, Ehrendorf discovered, by a heroic effort of concentration on what his fellow-diners were saying, that some of them believed it had been decided that the Leicesters and East Surreys were to counter-attack, while others believed that the identical units were to retreat. He tried to draw attention to these discrepant opinions but found it hard to get anyone's attention and was rewarded only with one or two baffled, toothy grins and, when he persisted, signs of offence being taken. It was true that he himself had had one or two beers … 'But what a gang of clowns, all the same!' he thought in wonder.

In due course, as the evening advanced, the first signs began to appear that the confusion at 111 Corps HQ was mirrored among the troops at Jitra. It also became clear that if the 11th Division was having such difficulty containing the advance guard of the Japanese force they would have little prospect of resisting the main assault which was bound to come in a matter of hours. Between the pudding, which was prunes and custard, and the cheese, things continued to go wrong at a comfortable rate. News came that Penang, still defenceless to air attack, had been heavily bombed for the second day running and that the docks and much of George Town were on fire. There was also word that the force commanded by Moorehead, which had failed to reach the Ledge in time and which had instead retired to take up a defensive position at Kroh, had suffered considerable losses. Would it have any chance now of resisting a Japanese thrust through the mountains led by tanks?

On the heels of this bad news of Moorehead's force came the word that Murray-Lyon had telephoned again for Heath's permission to withdraw; once again he had been referred to Singapore. 'This time,' thought Ehrendorf, 'either they agree or the entire 11th Division will be cashing in its chips.' For some minutes the Brigadier at the end of the table, none too sober, had been eyeing Ehrendorf with a sardonic and petulant expression. This man, who was short of breath and getting on in years, had a distressing habit of moistening his toothbrush moustache with a long and pendulous lower lip, an idiosyncrasy which he repeated at regular intervals. Now, as if guessing Ehrendorf's thoughts, he said in a loud and condescending tone: 'Perhaps our Yankee visitor would give us the benefit of his appraisal of the situation based, I've no doubt, on long experience of warfare in this part of the world.'

'I'm afraid, sir,' replied Ehrendorf in a neutral tone, 'that in such a complex matter …' And he shrugged diffidently.

But the Brigadier was enjoying himself. 'Come, come … No need to be bashful, Captain.'

And he stared at Ehrendorf sardonically while the other officers grew quiet waiting to see how he would deal with the situation. This was by no means the first time they had seen the Brigadier making sport of a newcomer. But Ehrendorf replied unruffled: 'If you really want to know what I think, sir, it's this … I think the 11th Division is in serious trouble if it stays where it is, that it should have been withdrawn from Jitra this morning by a competent commander in full possession of the facts, and that it must, at any rate, be withdrawn now before the main Jap attack and preferably behind a river wide enough to stop their tanks. Surely, sir, nobody is in any doubt about that?' And he gazed with equanimity at the Brigadier.

Gradually, despite the temperature, the glistening brows and necks, and the sweat-darkened shirts of the officers sitting round the table, the atmosphere grew chilly in the room. It was felt that Ehrendorf, who had been not only tolerated but treated rather well during this long day of battle, which had been felt no less keenly at 111 Corps HQ than at Jitra two hundred and fifty miles away, had displayed ingratitude by this low assessment of their efforts. They waited for the reply which would put this brash, too-clever-by-half American in his place. They waited and watched and, in due course, the Brigadier's lower lip climbed towards his nose and moistened his neatly-clipped moustache. Whether, given time, he would have made any other reply it was impossible to say, because at this moment news came that Malaya Command had authorized Murray-Lyon to disengage and withdraw behind the Kedah River. And most likely he would do so tonight under cover of darkness.

'Thank God for that!' said Ehrendorf, smiling bleakly at his companions. The battle of Jitra was over but at least the 11th Division had been saved. This might be a good time, if it were not raining, to take a stroll in the fresh air before the Second Law, eating away steadily like worm in the rafters, brought another section of the roof crashing down.

'Cheong, what thing trouble?'

Even the Major, by no means the most observant of men, could not have failed to take note of the Chinese servant's deep sighs and of the glances of despair he dispensed to right and left as he went about his duties. Moreover, Cheong was the last person to make a fuss unnecessarily. 'Cheong, blong what thing trouble?' the Major insisted.

'My too much fear,' said Cheong grimly. 'Japanese just now catch Penang.'

'Nonsense, Cheong,' exclaimed the Major, relieved to hear that Cheong's worries were of such a chimerical nature. 'Japanese this fashion no can. This blong fool pidgin.'

But the servant did not seemed reassured. 'S'pose Japanese catch Penang, tomollow maybe catch Singapore! Japanese pay Blitish too much lose face!' And shaking his head sadly he marched off to the kitchen refusing all comfort.

'Cheong has some story about Penang falling to the Japanese,' the Major informed Matthew later in the morning. 'I don't know where he's got it from. But once these absurd rumours start buzzing around one finds that even a sensible chap like him is believing them. Nothing could be worse for the morale of the Asiatics than this sort of thing. Besides, where would he have got the news even if it *were* true?' the Major added a trifle uneasily. 'There's been nothing in the papers about the Japs being anywhere near Penang.' Undoubtedly the whole thing was nonsense and the Major now regretted even mentioning it to Matthew who looked depressed enough already. 'Are you all right?' he asked. For the past three or four days Matthew had been sitting listlessly at his desk, haggard, unwashed, unshaven, the very picture of despair. He no longer ate anything. He was growing thin. Even his appetite for the rubber business had disappeared. At first, when he had still been expecting a visit from Vera Chiang, life had seemed capable of striking one or two sparks of interest from the dull succession of hours. But as the days went by and there was no sign of her he had relapsed into apathy.

What did it matter? he wondered, scratching his itchy scalp. She was beautiful, certainly, but so what? Even the idea of being married to a beautiful woman like Miss Chiang which had once seemed to him a delightful and tempting fantasy had lost its appeal. Was there any point in possessing a beautiful woman all to oneself? The answer was: no, not really. For, after all, he reasoned, having the proprietorial rights over a woman that a husband has over his wife or that a lover has over his mistress *does not actually get you any further forward*! For, unless you are the sort of Mohammedan who keeps his wife heavily veiled, her beauty is scarcely less available to casual passers-by in the street than it is to you, whose job it is to foot the bill for her food, lodging and general maintenance. True, the husband or lover has the added gratification of a range of intimacies usually denied to the passer-by. But look here! The effect produced by a beautiful woman is *visual* … touching her does not bring you any closer to her beauty than touching the paint of a Botticelli brings you closer to the beauty of his painting. It might even be argued that the closer you get to this painting or this woman the less you are able to appreciate its or her beauty, or even what makes each different from others of its kind. In the most intimate position of all, with your eyeball, so to speak, resting against the paint itself you would be hard put to it to tell any difference at all between this one and another. What had happened in the case of beautiful women, Matthew reflected, was that lust and aesthetic pleasure had got hopelessly mixed up. As a result, men felt obliged to marry beautiful women when in many cases they would have been better advised to marry a plain woman with a pleasant disposition and acquire, perhaps, some compensatingly beautiful object such as a piece of T'ang porcelain.

Matthew tried to engage the Major in conversation on the nature of feminine beauty. Very likely the Major had had more practical experience in these matters than he had. But the Major was distraught and plainly found it hard to give his full attention to disentangling the lustful from the aesthetic. The Major did try to cheer Matthew up, though, explaining to him that depression was bound to follow such a fever, never failed to do so. Matthew, unshaven, had taken to sitting all day with his feet on his father's desk, spinning the chamber of a revolver he had found in one of its drawers.

'A young man like you should think of getting married, you know,' said the Major who found the appearance of the revolver disquieting.

'Well, you never got married yourself, did you, Major?' asked Matthew accusingly.

'Ouf, well, no, I suppose not,' agreed the Major, taken aback by this frontal assault. 'Just between you and me, though, there have been moments when I've rather regretted it, just now and then, you know. After all, when all's said and done …' The Major lapsed into silence and at the same time felt himself invaded by loneliness and despair, so that the muscles of his face which was still wearing a cheerful expression began to ache with the effort of holding the expression in place and, severely pruned though it was, the moustache on his upper lip felt as heavy as antlers. 'Anyway,' he said at last, 'if you don't want to get married I think it might be a good idea to mention it to the Blacketts in the not-too-distant future.'

Matthew could see that there was something in what the Major said. Monty had dropped in the previous afternoon, explaining that he had had to escape from his family whose conversation these days was limited to talk of wedding arrangements. Nor was it simply 'bridesmaids and all that rubbish'; now, a prey to this new and, in Monty's opinion, sickening obsession, his family really had 'the bit between their teeth' … There was

endless talk of recipes for wedding-cakes, of patterns of wedding-dresses and of printers who would have to be consulted about suitable invitation cards. 'They really have it in for you, old boy,' Monty had warned him. 'Mark my words!'

'But I don't think I even said I wanted to marry her,' protested Matthew apathetically. 'I mean, good gracious …'

It was true, he really must do something about it but just at the moment he felt he could not quite face having it out with the Blacketts. And, after all, why not get married? Matthew wondered, grimly scratching his itchy scalp with the barrel of the revolver. After all, it is what everybody does. He was thirty-three, no longer a young man, really. All his Oxford friends and contemporaries except Ehrendorf were long since married and many of them had swarms of children into the bargain. His life certainly had not amounted to much so far: he might as well settle for reproducing himself like everyone else … at least that would be *something*. For a while, during his early optimistic years in Geneva pacing the deck of the League of Nations, he had believed he was playing a part, minuscule certainly but worthwhile none the less, in steering that great ship towards a hopeful shore. But then, torpedoed by the Axis Powers one after another, the League had sunk leaving merely a patch of oil and a few spars. The fact was that since the League had gone down, Matthew had been in a muddle; he had found it hard to bring himself to abandon ship, sunk though it was.

But sooner or later one must face reality. One must lay a solid foundation for one's life. The League had been like a pleasant collective fantasy of mankind, dreaming of a better life for itself the way a tramp asleep in a hedge might dream of living in a mansion. Yes, why should he not get married to Joan and begin to live a more practical sort of life? One must make up one's mind in the long run. And Matthew sighed, dejectedly scratching his ear with the revolver and pulling the trigger as he did so. The click caused the Major to start violently. 'I'll go over and see the Blacketts later on,' said Matthew in a more resolute tone, taking his feet off the desk, putting down the revolver and sitting up straight.

On his way to the Blacketts' compound Matthew paused on its threshold in the green antechamber lit with rare tropical flowers. Here, on his way to propose marriage to Joan (a spurious proposal, if Monty was to be believed, since she appeared to think it had already been made), standing beside the African mallow and crêpe myrtle, cassia and rambutan, Matthew suddenly found himself captured like a bird in a net by the heavy perfumes that wavered invisibly over the dripping leaves and glistening flowers. And while he was still lingering there to sniff and marvel at the new sensations which were flooding into his mind, one, two, three butterflies, astonishingly beautiful and of a kind he had never seen before with pink and yellow on their wings and long, trailing tails like kites came fluttering around him, as if they had taken a liking to his freshly ironed linen suit and were considering settling on it. He watched them, filled with wonder, noticing how the beat of their wings, slower than that of European butterflies, made them rise and fall as if in slow motion, and swoop and glide almost like birds. And presently these three butterflies, which had finally decided to forsake the elegant suit in which Matthew was going to make his proposal for the scarlet flowers of the Indian coral tree, were joined by a fourth, even more beautiful and languorous in flight, and larger, too, with black and white embroidered wings which suggested the scribbles of the batik shirts he had seen the Malays wearing. This butterfly Matthew was tentatively able to identify, thanks to a manual the Major had lent him while he was convalescent, as a Common Tree Nymph.

To have a profound spiritual or sensual experience, he was thinking as he strode on into the corridor of white-flowered pili nut trees, one must rupture one's old habits of feeling. That was it, exactly … and that was what he would be doing by marrying Joan. You have to burst through the skin of your old life which surrounds you the way a bladder of skin surrounds the meat and oatmeal of a haggis! He paused on the white colonnaded steps which led up to the Blacketts' house, pleased to find himself in such a positive frame of mind at this important moment of his life. Then, straightening his shoulders, he plunged into the shade of the verandah in search of Joan.

Inside, however, he found himself unexpectedly baulked. Miss Blackett was not at home, though she was expected back shortly. Would Mr Webb wait for her in the drawing-room? Matthew surveyed the old Malay servant, Abdul, feeling some of his resolution draining away: the old man's eyes, dim and watery with age, were expressionless. Matthew said he would wait and was shown into the drawing-room. It was cool in here and a great stillness prevailed. A patch of whiteness stirred on the white sofa and Matthew recognized a friend; Ming Toy, Kate's Siamese cat was taking its afternoon nap in the coolest and quietest room it could find. Matthew went to sit down beside it, feeling in his pocket for a letter the Major had handed to him as he was on his way out. He opened it: it contained only a photograph. Matthew gazed at it, moved, for it was a photograph he remembered having seen once before, years ago, when he and Ehrendorf had been at Oxford together.

They had been taking an evening stroll by the Cherwell, he remembered, towards the end of their last summer term. It was one of those hushed, damp, rather chilly June evenings that seem to go on for ever before darkness falls. The knowledge that they would soon be coming to the end of this phase of their life, saying goodbye to friends and launching out into careers that were still barely imaginable, had cast an air of melancholy over them. There had been a smell of damp grass, perhaps the flutter of a water-hen in the thicket overhanging the river bank. Ehrendorf had been saying how he felt he had changed during the time he had spent in Europe, how difficult he believed he would find it returning to his home town in America. 'Why don't

you stay here then?' Matthew had asked. Ehrendorf had handed him the photograph then, saying with a smile: 'My brothers and sisters. They'd never understand if I didn't go back.'

Matthew was now studying the photograph again. It showed Ehrendorf looking younger, as he had looked at Oxford, but otherwise not much changed. He was tall, handsome, smiling as ever. The absence of a moustache made him look younger, too. He was standing in the middle of the picture looking directly into the lens of the camera: grouped around him was what looked like a brood of dwarfs and hunchbacks, all gazing up reverently at their brother with gargoyle faces.

Well! Matthew still remembered how surprised he had been by the contrast between Ehrendorf and his brothers and sisters: it was as if every virtue and physical grace had been concentrated in him to the detriment of his adoring siblings. And Ehrendorf adored them, too, that was the point … or why else would he have gone back to Kansas City (or wherever it was) when all his interests and the people who understood him were no longer there but in Europe? But in the end Kansas City had not quite managed to claim him … nor Europe either, come to that. Poor Ehrendorf! Thanks to the Rhodes scholarship that had taken him to Oxford the poor fellow had split in two like an amoeba! Half of him had now fetched up in Singapore and had made itself unhappy by falling in love with the English girl whom he, Matthew, was about to marry. Matthew sighed, wondering whether it might not be a better idea to put it off until another time. The last thing he wanted to do was to hurt Ehrendorf's feelings.

While he was considering this he seized Ming Toy and dragged that furry creature nearer; he had been interrupted by Walter on a previous occasion while trying to find out what sex the cat belonged to: this would be a good opportunity to pursue his researches. Ming Toy lay there, still half asleep and unprotesting, while Matthew once again lifted his magnificent tail and inspected his copiously furred hindquarters for some sign of gender. Finding none he picked up a pencil and began to rummage about with it. Ming Toy began to purr.

'Oh hello …' Walter was standing in the door, giving Matthew a very odd look indeed

'Oh!' exclaimed Matthew, startled. He hurriedly dropped Ming Toy's tail and shoved him aside, deciding it was probably best not to try to explain. 'I was just waiting for Joan,' he said, recovering quickly, 'but perhaps I could have a word with you about this replanting business …'

'I can only give you five minutes, I'm afraid. Come into my study.'

Matthew had not been in Walter's study before and was somewhat surprised to find that the room had an unused air. Walter himself had the air of a stranger as he looked around: indeed, he seldom used this room, preferring the tranquillity of his dressing-room on the first floor. He was looking impatiently at his watch, so Matthew explained that he thought it was wrong for the rubber companies managed by Blackett and Webb to be replanting healthy trees. Mature trees produced rubber badly needed for the War Effort; replanting them with immature rubber which yielded nothing simply did not make sense.

'Monty told you, did he, about the excess profits tax? You realize that we make the same "standard" profit whatever we do?'

Matthew nodded.

'And that replanting expenses are allowable against tax? Yes. Well, I agree that if we were the only people in the rubber industry there would be something in what you say. But alas, we're not. We have rivals and competitors, my dear boy! If we don't replant now with this new high-yielding material, particularly now when there's a clear financial advantage in doing so, while our competitors *do* replant, where shall we be when it reaches maturity? Not on Easy Street, I can tell you! Because we'll find ourselves producing half as much rubber per acre as, say, Langfield and Bowser at the same cost, or perhaps even a higher cost. It simply won't wash, I'm afraid. Now does that answer your objection?'

'Well, not really, no, Walter,' said Matthew becoming physically restless as he always did when excited but controlling himself as best he could. 'Because I don't deny the commercial advantage. How could I? I don't know anything about these things. But this is a matter of principle. Your argument is the one that businessmen always use when asked to make some sacrifice in the public interest: "We would like to help but it's out of the question if we are to remain competitive." The business community in Rangoon said exactly the same thing years ago when asked to make some contribution to the welfare of the coolies who were in the most dreadful state of poverty and dying like flies. But no! Spending money to help those poor devils would have made us vulnerable, Blackett and Webb included … You see, I've been reading about our dealings in the rice trade in my father's papers and frankly … Ah!' he grunted as the cat, which had taken a liking to him and followed them into the study, suddenly sprang into his lap.

'The fact that an argument is often used, by businessmen or anyone else,' replied Walter calmly, 'does not unfortunately mean that it is any the less true. Would that it were! As for using all our resources now, as you recommend, for the War Effort and finding ourselves as a nation without any means of support when the war is over, well, I doubt if that is a very good idea. A nation, Matthew, is roughly speaking as strong as it is wealthy. And it's as wealthy as, again roughly speaking, its individual businesses are healthy. And they are healthy only as long as they are able to compete with the industries and firms of other nations in their line of business. If we follow your advice the big Dutch estates in Java and Sumatra (which, incidentally, got on to new clones before we did) will have put us out of business by 1946 or 1947 when their new stock matures.' Walter beamed at Matthew who, for his part, found himself at a loss for words, partly because this was an arguement he had not yet considered, partly because Ming Toy was kneading his trousers in order to test out

his (or possibly her) claws, evidently not realizing that Matthew's sensitive skin lay just underneath. Walter got to his feet.

'But wait, Walter …' Matthew sprang up and the cat, which he had forgotten about, in turn had to spring for its life. Matthew hurried after Walter. 'It's madness! With the Japs in the north of the country we should be producing every scrap of rubber we can. Who knows but that in a few months they won't have taken over a lot of the estates?' Matthew clapped a hand to his brow as he tried to catch up with Walter. Wait, what was he doing arguing with Walter? He had planned to ask Joan to marry him and here he was instead, arguing with her father.

'There's no shipping, anyway,' said Walter, scowling for the first time in their discussion. 'The wharves are packed with rubber already that we have no way of shifting. Well, now I really must be going, old chap. Duty calls. You and Joan are getting along all right, are you?' he called back over his shoulder as he hurried down the steps to where his car was waiting. 'Come and have supper. Bring the Major, too. We don't dress, as you know.'

'Well, that was another thing I wanted to … about getting married and so on …' cried Matthew. But Walter, with a final wave, had disappeared into the back of his Bentley and it had moved off.

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Matthew sat down on the steps, rather disconsolately. Joan still had not returned. Perhaps this was just as well, for he was by no means sure that he was all that keen on marrying her, after all. It had certainly seemed a good idea earlier in the afternoon, though. Besides, he had gone to the trouble of shaving and putting on a new suit. 'Perhaps she will refuse,' he thought hopefully; that would settle the matter without his having to make a decision. (But no, there was no chance of her refusing.) He sighed, and for some reason felt as lonely and as unwanted as if she *had* refused him.

Meanwhile, four bright eyes were surveying him from behind a dazzling cascade of bougainvillaea. One pair belonged to Kate Blackett, the other to a friend of Kate's called Melanie Langfield. This Melanie Langfield, who was of an age with Kate, belonged to the detested Langfield family and was, in fact, a grand-daughter of old Solomon Langfield, the mere thought of whom was enough to make the bristles on Walter's spine puff up with loathing. The raid which the two girls had just performed on the larder had been partly foiled by the vigilance of Abdul, the major-domo. Before being discovered, however, they had each managed to get a spoonful of Kate's 'Radio Malt' and Melanie had had the presence of mind to slip a jar of lemonade crystals into the pocket of her frock. Now she and Kate, hidden by the bougainvillaea, were alternately dipping moistened fingers into the jar and licking off the crystals that stuck to them, enjoying the tingling acid taste on their tongues.

What was a member of the hated Langfield family doing at the Blacketts' house? Kate and Melanie, as it happened, had been sent to the same school in England and neither of them had any other friends of her own age in Singapore. Since neither of their respective sets of parents could be convinced that the other children who abounded in the colony were quite the social equals of their own daughter both families had found themselves in a dilemma. The result was that though the Langfields and the Blacketts did not for a moment cease to speak ill of each other or to detest each other any the less heartily, they did sometimes grudgingly agree to the smaller children playing together 'unofficially'. This was fortunate because otherwise Kate and Melanie might have had to spend their childhood totally immured, as so many unhappy children do, behind their parents' snobbery. Kate and Melanie would be allowed to be friends for as long as they could be thought of as 'children'; in just such a way Monty and Joan had been allowed when small to play with little Langfields they would now scarcely acknowledge in the street even if the rickshaws they were travelling in happened to pull up alongside each other at a traffic light. Thanks to this fiction that a child did not exist or, at worst, like an immature wasp had not yet grown its sting, Walter could even, and often did, reach out a paternal hand to fondle Melanie's charming blonde curls and without suffering any ill effects whatsoever. But if you had insisted on telling him that this was not a child but a *Langfield* he would certainly have sprung back in horror. He would have been as likely then to stroke the slimy head of a toad as little Melanie's curls.

Melanie, as it happened, was a pale little creature who looked younger than Kate though they were the same age. But her pallor concealed a powerful personality and a restless inventor of schemes. As for obeying rules, at school she had more than once spat in the eye of authority (she had practised spitting in the garden in Singapore). Rules were made to be broken, in Melanie's view. Yes, Langfield blood ran in her veins all right; if Walter could have read her school report he would have been in no doubt about that. But perhaps she had mellowed a little, had she not, in the course of the past few months as her body began the upsetting change from that of a child to that of a woman? Well, no, not really, no, she had not mellowed at all. All that had happened was that her preoccupations had begun to change, and Kate's with them: both girls had become more curious about *men*. A few months earlier those four eyes observing Matthew would have passed over him without really noticing him, as over a potted plant or a chest of drawers. But now they remained on him attentively as he sat on the steps with his head in his hands.

'Darling, whatever is the matter with the Human Bean?'

‘Darling, I haven’t the faintest.’

‘Haven’t you, darling? Let’s go and ask him.’

Matthew was quite glad to see the girls, though surprised that Kate, who usually called him ‘Matthew’ should call him ‘My dear darling Human Bean’. When she had introduced him to her dearest friend in the whole world, Melanie, he asked her to explain and she told him how Ehrendorf had called him a ‘wonderful human bean’. ‘Ah, poor Ehrendorf,’ he thought. ‘Where is he now, I wonder?’

While this was being settled Melanie’s eyes had been examining Matthew’s face in a way which was every bit as calculating as one might have expected even of a senior Langfield. And now she had a suggestion which to Kate seemed staggering in its audacity: the Human Bean should take them to the cinema! This was daring: neither girl was allowed to go to the cinema until she had forced her way through a veritable thicket of preconditions: an eternity of good behaviour was demanded, not to mention school reports which were favourable almost to the point of fawning … and, most thorny of all, a preliminary inspection of the film by an adult member of the family.

But if Melanie’s first suggestion was daring, her second was breathtaking in its temerity. For, fixing her bright, unblinking eyes on Matthew’s face like a lizard watching a moth, she added: ‘We want to go and see Robert Taylor in *Waterloo Bridge*.’ Kate grew very tense; she held her breath and her heart began to pound. She had difficulty in preventing herself from gasping at this. *Waterloo Bridge* was a picture for grown-ups. It would never have qualified as suitable in a million years! It spoke (so they had been told by Mrs Langfield’s Irish maid) of intimate and romantic relations between men and women. It was about all *that* sort of thing (for Kate ‘all that sort of thing’ was a churning vat of dark and still mysterious experience from beneath whose tap-tapping lid there issued an occasional whiff of intoxicating steam). She suddenly began to feel rather sick with excitement and dread. One moment it had been an ordinary, rather boring afternoon, the next she was walking along the edge of a dizzy precipice with the gravel crumbling from under her feet.

Matthew, meanwhile, was looking rather bemused, like someone who has just been roused from a heavy afternoon nap. He looked vaguely at his watch, shook his wrist and looked at it again. But it was working, after all.

‘Go on, be a sport,’ said Melanie. ‘We could go to the four o’clock show and be back for supper,’ she added persuasively.

‘No one would know,’ put in Kate, and received a vicious, warning pinch from Melanie: she would arouse the Bean’s suspicions by making stupid remarks like that.

Matthew was not all that keen, anyway. It was too hot to sit in a picture-house. ‘I really came over to see Joan, you know. There was something I wanted to ask her.’

‘She won’t be back for *ages*!’

‘Probably not before supper!’

‘Oh, won’t she?’ Matthew looked rather baffled and again consulted his watch. ‘Couldn’t we go another time? Say, the day after tomorrow, for example?’

‘But that’s *Sunday*!’ screamed Melanie. ‘Nobody goes to the pictures on *Sunday*. It’s simply not *done*!’

‘Oh, well then …’ Matthew hesitated. He really wanted to return to the Mayfair to ponder his conversation with Walter and perhaps discuss it with the Major. ‘You’re sure Joan won’t be back till supper?’

‘Of course we’re sure, you dumb-bell!’ shouted Melanie, beside herself with excitement and frustration. By now she had sized Matthew up and she could see that he needed a *firm hand*.

‘Wouldn’t you like instead just to go and eat ices at John Little’s?’

‘No we bloody well wouldn’t!’ declared Melanie emphatically: she had noticed Kate brightening at the idea, just like a little girl, and knew it must be scotched immediately.

Matthew scratched his head uncertainly and looked around. Then he again looked at his watch but that still offered no assistance. The girls stood there like coiled springs.

‘Well, in that case …’ he murmured and came to a stop again. Melanie rolled her eyes to heaven at these hesitations. ‘All right then,’ he said at last. ‘I’ll ask the Major if I can borrow his car.’

The girls gave a great whoop of delight.

‘But you must bring your gas-mask cases.’

‘Have we got to?’ They had been issued, by some stroke of bureaucratic insensitivity, with (of all things!) Mickey Mouse gas-masks! As if they were little kids! It was too, too shaming! They tried to explain this to Matthew. They would rather be *gassed*! But Matthew was adamant … No gas-masks, no pictures. The girls were so overwhelmed, however, by the startling success of Melanie’s boldness that in the end they were prepared to concede gas-masks. Curiously, as they dashed back into the house to get them they were holding hands tightly like two little children, having forgotten to be sophisticated in their excitement.

Accompanying Matthew back through the compound to the Mayfair, Kate and Melanie were inclined to be furtive at first. They were afraid of being spotted at the last moment by some interfering adult. But once they had plunged into the corridor of pili nut trees they considered themselves fairly safe, barring some coincidence. Mrs Blackett never ventured this far.

Unfortunately, while borrowing the keys of the Lagonda from the Major, Matthew could not resist mentioning the conversation he had just had with Walter about replanting. And the Major, who was also concerned about this matter, mentioned the interesting fact that two or three of the other small rubber

companies manged by Blackett and Webb had attempted, in the interests of the War Effort, to stop this replanting in order to maintain the highest possible rate of tapping. But faced with Blackett and Webb's orders to the contrary they had been unable to do anything about it. Matthew was astonished. 'But that's absurd, Major! How can they stop a company doing what it wants? They only manage it, don't they? They don't own it.'

So, while the minutes ticked away and the girls grew fretful, the Major explained. Blackett and Webb were responsible not only for the daily management (buying of equipment and supplies, selling of produce, tapping policy, hiring of labour and so on) but for the investment of profits as well. For some years now they had made it their policy to invest the profits of one company in the shares of the other companies for which they acted as agents. The result of this incestuous investment as far as the Mayfair, to give an example, was concerned, was that the Mayfair's shares were concentrated in other companies controlled by Blackett and Webb, while the shares of each other company were held by the Mayfair and other Blackett companies. Thus, a revolt against Blackett and Webb's tapping policy by the directors of any single company could be easily quelled by marshalling proxy votes from the others. The only way in which Blackett and Webb's grip on the destinies of individual companies could be loosened would be by a simultaneous uprising, so to speak, of a majority of them acting in concert. But since the investment had taken place not only in rubber but in all sorts of other companies, shipping, trading, insurance and whatnot … such a simultaneous uprising was naturally out of the question. The beauty of this system from Blackett and Webb's point of view was that they had not invested a penny in many of these companies and yet they lay as firmly in their grip as if they owned them lock, stock and barrel.

'Oh, do let's go!' pleaded Kate. 'We'll miss the beginning.'

'But good gracious! Can that be legal?'

'Perfectly, it appears.'

'Do get a move on. There's no time for all this *talk*!' Melanie seized the dazed Matthew by one arm and began to drag him physically towards the verandah door. But she was very slight and Matthew was very heavy: she only managed to drag him one or two reluctant paces.

'Well I must say …' Matthew might have gone on standing there until they had missed the newsreel had not the Major noticed the girls' anxiety and said: 'But I can see these young ladies don't want me to waste any more of your time. What are you going to see, by the way?'

'Oh, wait,' said Matthew. 'Something or other called …'

'A picture with Robert Taylor and Vivien Leigh,' gabbled Melanie, interrupting him with the presence of mind for which Langfields were notorious in Singapore. 'Now we must *go*!'

And go they did, at long last. Hardly had they turned out into the road than they passed Joan's open Riley tourer just returning from the Cold Storage. Joan caught sight of them as they passed and the girls saw her head turn. But by that time they were away. Matthew, who managed to be both a cautious and a reckless driver at the same time, was peering with grim concentration through his dusty spectacles at the road ahead. He did not see her.

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One hour, two hours passed. The sun dipped towards Sumatra in the west. Now Matthew was once more peering at the road ahead with a grim expression but this time the Lagonda was going along Orchard Road in the opposite direction, to drop Melanie at the Langfields' elegant house on Nassim Road. It was cooler. The city was bathed in a gentle golden light which, for a little while before sunset, came as a reprieve from the dazzling hours of daylight. But still, Matthew had the dazed and vulnerable feeling, the slight taste of ashes, which he always experienced when he came out of a cinema into daylight. The girls sat crammed together beside him, for the Lagonda was only a two-seater, each busy with her own thoughts. As far as Kate was concerned these had a somewhat apprehensive cast. She was afraid there might be a row when she got home. She was also afraid that she might have got Matthew into trouble by taking advantage of his innocence.

For the most part, however, Kate's thoughts were concerned with the film they had just seen. As they were coming out of the picture-house Melanie had whispered: 'Isn't he divine?' Kate had nodded vehemently, but with closed lips. She was not certain whether Melanie meant Matthew or Robert Taylor and was afraid of agreeing to the wrong one. But after a moment Melanie added condescendingly: 'She's not *bad* … but I don't think that sort of woman is *really* attractive, do you?' This time Kate shook her head vehemently, still with set lips. Melanie could only mean Vivien Leigh, that much was settled at least. But whether or not that sort of woman was 'really attractive' was something that Kate had not even considered. Nor was she even sure how to begin to have an opinion. Melanie was simply amazing! While she herself had been struggling to understand what was happening in the story (which had suddenly grown puzzling with Vivien Leigh dressed in a beret, a sweater and high-heeled shoes hanging around Waterloo Station and saying hello to soldiers for no obvious reason), Melanie had clearly been coming to the conclusion that if Robert Taylor had had to choose between her and Vivien Leigh he would have chosen Melanie!

Kate was also afraid that Melanie had been rather rude to Matthew. For Matthew had grown restless once

the old news-reel was over (he had been gratified to see a hundred thousand Italian prisoners being marched along in North Africa by one British Tommy). He had sat placidly enough through the beginning when Robert Taylor in uniform said to his driver: 'To France … to Waterloo Station,' and even through the air-raid on Waterloo Bridge when he bumped into Vivien Leigh with the sirens going and the wardens blowing whistles and said: 'You little fool, are you tired of life?' and she had said, as they were walking to the air-raid shelter: 'Would it be too unmilitary if we were to run?' and gave him a good luck charm to stop him being killed, which seemed to be made of Bakelite.

During all that part Matthew had not been too bad: he had only begun to fidget during the scenes when the strict sort of headmistress who ran the ballet was being beastly to Vivien Leigh who wanted to flirt with Robert Taylor who had not had to go to France after all, but then he had had to go before they had time to get married. Matthew had fidgeted worse and worse during the scene in the Candlelight Club with all the violins when they danced to the 'Farewell Waltz' which sounded very like 'Auld Lang Syne', and worse still during the scene where Vivien Leigh, who had been sacked from the ballet and had run out of money, read in the paper that he had been killed, while she was waiting in the Ritz to have tea with his mother, Lady Margaret, who turned up late and found her drunk.

'Are you sure you want to stay for the rest?' Matthew had asked suddenly in a loud voice at about the time when Vivien Leigh had started hanging around Waterloo Station saying things like 'hello' and 'welcome home' to soldiers. It was at that moment that Melanie had asked him to be quiet, she was trying to concentrate, and a man in the row in front had said shush. Kate had turned once or twice to look at Matthew after that. He had sunk very low in his seat with his shoulders to his ears: she could tell by the light from the screen that he was unhappy.

Meanwhile, Vivien Leigh was getting more and more unhappy, too, and spending more and more time with her beret and handbag and high heels saying hello to soldiers even though it did not seem to agree with her. There was something wrong, that was obvious, but what was it? Kate had no idea but could not bring herself to ask Melanie. And when Robert Taylor had suddenly appeared again at the station with some other soldiers she was about to say hello to, instead of looking pleased to see him she had looked quite upset and had said: 'Oh Roy, you're alive,' and gone on acting in the same peculiar way. Even Robert Taylor did not seem to know what ailed her. He had taken her up to his castle in Scotland, and she had got on quite well this time with Lady Margaret and they were going to be married, but she still had moments of being peculiar and finally she had told Lady Margaret, who had become very understanding, that she had something to confess though without saying what it was. But Lady Margaret had seemed to guess (which was more than Kate could!) and said something like 'Oh my poor child' and then had seemed to agree that she should run away to London again which she did and then threw herself under a lorry on Waterloo Bridge and that was the end apart from some moping by Robert Taylor on Waterloo Bridge. Still, Kate, though she had not understood it, had found it a shattering experience. She only wished that Melanie had not been quite such a bully with Matthew. At the same time, in some strange way, a part of Kate *did* know what the film was about … the explanation, she knew, lay just below the surface of her mind, and when she uncovered it, it would seem perfectly familiar.

But now they had reached Melanie's house on Nassim Road. Matthew would have driven up the drive and into this Langfield stronghold like some innocent wayfarer straying into a robber's den, had not Kate had her wits about her and stopped him at the gate. Melanie gabbled a quick formula of thanks at Matthew, turned her bright, beady eyes on Kate for a moment and then bolted up the drive. Kate somehow knew that if their visit to the cinema were discovered Melanie would be ready with a story to divert all blame from herself to Matthew or to the Blackett family. But then, what could one expect of a Langfield? Even Kate was not too young to have learned that it made as much sense to reproach a Langfield for treacherous behaviour as it would to condemn a fox for killing a chicken.

Unexpectedly, Kate and Matthew became cheerful once they had dropped Melanie, and although it was almost supper-time they decided to buy mango ice-creams at the California Sandwich Shoppe to eat on the way home. As she sat in the Lagonda beside Matthew trying not to let the ice-cream drip on to her frock, a profound feeling of happiness stole over Kate. At first she thought it was because of the ice-cream, but even when she had finished the ice-cream it persisted. Besides, it was not just happiness, it was a feeling of relief to find herself alone with Matthew: she felt that she had no need to explain anything to him, that he understood her immediately and that somehow he even understood her without her having to say anything at all. This feeling of being understood, though it only lasted for the ten minutes or so it took them to return to the Mayfair, came as a shock and a revelation to Kate. It abruptly opened up all sorts of new possibilities, not just with the Human Bean, of course, though now she understood why Joan wanted to marry him, but of a much more general kind. It was as if she had suddenly realized *what human beans are for*! To understand each other without speaking, that was what they were for! … She felt she wanted to touch Matthew, but did not quite dare. As they reached the Mayfair she began to worry again about the row which might await her. How peaceful it was here beneath the green arching trees of Tanglin! She clutched her gas-mask case and hoped for the best.

The car had hardly come to a stop when they saw the Major signalling to them from the verandah. They could tell from his expression that something was wrong. Kate's heart sank: her parents must have found out already what she had been up to. But it turned out to be something else which was troubling the Major. He

waited until they had got out of the car and come quite close. Then he said grimly: 'Penang has fallen. François has just got back from there. It seems incredible but I'm afraid there's no doubt about it.'

As Kate walked home through the compound she thought: 'With all the fuss nobody will worry about me going to the cinema, at any rate.'

When Matthew and the Major followed her to the Blacketts' house a few minutes later they found an atmosphere of despondency and alarm. Mrs Blackett was worried about her brother, Charlie, who had returned to his regiment only three days earlier after a spell of comparative safety in Singapore. Had there been a big defeat and, if so, had the Punjabis been involved in it? Nobody knew, of course. For all anyone knew the Punjabis were still safely lodged in some barracks in Kuala Lumpur. Walter, though showing concern for his wife's anxiety, was less worried about Charlie than about the general situation: Penang was such a familiar part of his life in Malaya that it seemed inconceivable that it should fall to the Japanese. Moreover, he was indignant that he should have had no prior warning from the authorities that such a disaster might occur. As for Monty, he was worried about his own prospects: he was afraid that unless he was careful he might end up having to fight Japanese himself. Everything was going wrong these days. All this ghastly wedding furore and now Penang. He could hardly even find anyone to talk to! Even Sinclair Sinclair seemed determined to give up his staff job and rejoin his regiment, the Argylls, if he could wangle it. Why he should want to go and get himself killed was more than Monty could fathom. Monty had been hoping that Sinclair might be able to use some influence on his behalf if the worst came to the worst, but he only seemed interested in getting shot at.

Of all the guests who assembled for supper at the Blacketts' only Dr Brownley and Dupigny did not seem dismayed by the fall of Penang. The former went around shaking hands with everyone politely and murmuring to them in a soothing voice, as if in the presence of a mortal illness. 'Sad news, I'm afraid,' he whispered to Matthew, who was startled to see him winking and nodding. But this was only a nervous idiosyncrasy, it appeared. The Doctor had entered accompanied by Dupigny whose wounds he had been dressing. Despite these wounds Dupigny seemed in good spirits. A dressing had been applied to one side of his face with sticking plaster and there was another dressing on the back of his skull where the hair had been partly shaved away to accommodate it. Nevertheless, his eyes glinted with malicious pleasure as he surveyed the despondent scene in the Blacketts' drawing-room. This was for two reasons: firstly, the Blacketts had behaved so condescendingly towards him since the fall of France that he found it agreeable to see them in a humbler frame of mind; secondly, it vindicated all the sombre predictions he had been making for the past few months concerning the Japanese to the general amusement of Singapore. Moreover, in a general way it reinforced all his deterministic beliefs about the way nations behave.

For Dupigny a nation resembled a very primitive human being: this human being consisted of, simply, an appetite and some sort of mechanism for satisfying the appetite. In the case of a nation the appetite was usually, if not quite invariably, economic … (now and again the national vanity which at intervals gripped nations like France and Britain would compel them to some act which made no sense economically: but in this respect, too, they resembled human beings). As for the mechanism for fulfilling the appetite, what was that but a nation's armed forces? The more powerful the armed forces the better the prospects for satiating the appetite; the more powerful the armed forces the more likely (indeed, inevitable, in Dupigny's view) that an attempt *would be made* to satiate it; just as heavyweight boxers are more frequently involved in tavern brawls than, say, dentists, so the very existence of power demands that it should be used. His own failure in Indo-China had merely confirmed him in his cynical views. The League of Nations? Nothing but a pious waste of time!

'Never mind, he's had a good innings,' the Doctor observed soothingly to no one in particular, while Matthew, who was sitting on a sofa nearby, gazed at him baffled by this remark for which he could see no sane explanation. Joan came to sit beside him and he realized with a mild shock: 'People must now think we're *a couple*!' He could not think of anything to say to her, however. She said in an undertone: 'Poor Monty, they keep trying to call him up for the F.M.S. Volunteers. But, of course, he's doing essential war work and can't possibly go. Besides, they can hardly be "volunteers" if they're forcing him to join, can they?' Matthew had to agree that, strictly speaking … She ignored him, however, and went on: 'I do believe that François is wearing new clothes.'

It was true. After months of appearing in the threadbare suit he had managed to salvage in his flight from Saigon Dupigny was now smartly dressed in a new shirt, new trousers, and a new linen jacket, not to mention a splendid pair of gleaming shoes. This elegant attire he had succeeded, not without difficulty, in looting from a burning shop in George Town. The bandages which swathed the fingers and palms of both hands were the result of this gallant effort, though he did not say so when anyone remarked on them, implying diffidently instead that he had been obliged to rescue someone (himself, as it happened: he had spent too long searching for clothes that were the right size) from a blazing building where he had been trapped by a beam which had fallen across his foot. 'With the roof about to fall,' he was explaining modestly to Mrs Blackett as he gingerly accepted a *pahit* from the Chinese boy's tray, 'it was necessary to pick it up with the bare hands, otherwise he would not have had a chance, the poor fellow.'

Walter, overhearing this, frowned at Dupigny, not because he disbelieved this story, but to indicate that he should speak guardedly in front of the 'boy'; because if news of the disaster which had befallen Penang, a

town which had been British for centuries, should circulate among the natives, what would be the state of their morale? The Major noticed Walter's frown and knew what he was thinking. But he also knew that Walter's precaution was futile, for had not Cheong told him of the fall of Penang that morning before anyone else had heard of it? The Major was doubly distressed to think that the Europeans had been evacuated from Penang while the rest of the population had been left to make the best of it.

Joan's place beside Matthew on the sofa had been taken by Monty, who said gloomily: 'You've heard they're trying to shove me into the bloody Volunteers?'

'Joan just told me.'

'They're being frightfully sticky about it. And now all this about Penang. If you ask me they're making a complete mess of things.' Monty sighed, wondering if he could get himself sent on a trade mission to Australia or America. To think that a few days ago life had seemed perfectly OK!

Dupigny, surrounded by a sombre group, was describing the nightmare journey he had made from Penang to KL. The last fifty miles he had travelled in a lorry belonging to a Chinese rubber dealer who had been out collecting rubber from small-holdings. One of the drawbacks to this vehicle was that there had been nothing to screen the engine from themselves. It had been right there with them in the cab, so that every time the driver accelerated there had been great flashes of flame from the fuel chamber, not to mention spurts of water from the radiator. The only seat for both himself and the Chinese had been a plank on a wooden box. To make matters worse there was no way of fastening the door: at every turn he risked plunging out into the rainy jungle. From time to time, when the engine faltered on an incline, the Chinese had leaned forward to grope encouragingly in the entrails, putting his hand on the carburettor to supply a choke or pinning a raw wire against the metal of the cab to sound the horn. The wiring festooned everywhere had sparkled like a Christmas tree and every few miles he, Dupigny, had been obliged to cool his heels while the Chinese crawled into the lorry's intestines with a spanner to perform some major operation. By the time they had reached KL, thanks to the flames, the boiling water and the steam from the engine, he had been grilled, boiled and finally poached, like a Dieppe sole! How glad he had been to come upon young Ehrendorf having a drink by himself at the Majestic Hotel opposite the railway station.

'Did he say how the fighting was going?'

'He was not cheerful. But he did not say anything specific.'

'Well, we had better eat,' said Walter, ushering his guests towards the dining-room. 'Perhaps things are not quite as bad as they seem.'

Penang, after all, was almost five hundred miles away. There was still plenty of territory between themselves and the Japanese. Still, although of little importance commercially, Penang had always been a part of the Blacketts' world. Now they felt the ground beginning to shift under their feet.

The meal would have been lugubrious indeed if Dr Brownley had not been there. At first he had been uneasy, inclined to think: 'Good gracious, this makes it twenty-two times in a row that they've invited me here and I still haven't invited them back!' But he was a doctor, after all, and could see that this evening the Blacketts needed the comfort of some more familiar topic to occupy their minds. And what better than the Langfields? A long time ago he had discovered that there was nothing that could make a Blackett feel himself again so swiftly as a Langfield (or vice versa, of course, for both these eminent Singapore families were the Doctor's patients). Should a Blackett find himself suffering from depression, insomnia or loss of appetite, it would usually take no more than a faintly disparaging remark about the Langfields' style of life, their furniture or curtains, say, to effect a cure. On other occasions, when a thorough quickening of the blood was indicated, as in cases of migraine, back-ache, severe constipation or the loss of concentration which Mrs Blackett increasingly suffered as she grew older, stronger meat was sometimes required. Then the Doctor would disclose some more serious matter, the Langfields' reluctance to pay their bills, or their attempts to claim they had paid when they had not, or requests for medical attention on social occasions. As he had dined regularly with both families over the years and with each had concluded that the only topic of conversation guaranteed to please was the other, he had, perhaps, not been as sparing with this drug as he should. It had come about, indeed, that nowadays, just to maintain the family in normal health, he felt it necessary as a matter of course to prepare one or two choice bits of gossip and bring them to the table, the way a zoo-keeper brings herrings in a bucket when he visits the sea-lions.

'Walter, you'd hardly believe the latest about a certain family (I won't say who, mind, but it's no secret they live on Nassim Road)! Well, it seems that they've really outdone themselves this time!' And the Doctor chuckled conspiratorially, looking round the table. The Blacketts, shocked though they were by the loss of Penang, disturbed by thoughts of the future, felt nevertheless a slight alleviation of their burden. The Doctor cut away busily at his veal cutlet, taking his time but still chuckling, while the Blacketts put aside thoughts of Penang in flames and focused their attention on him. 'Yes,' thought the Doctor as he began to enlarge on an example of the Langfields' shortcomings, 'that's what they need. Something to take their minds off it.'

In no time at all one herring after another was describing a glistening arc over the dining-table to be deftly plucked out of the air by one whiskered Blackett head after another. Presently, only the Major, Dupigny and Matthew were sitting there without the head and tail of a fish protruding from their mouths. What was all this about? they wondered. And what did it have to do with Penang?

Matthew, in his excitement and concern over this serious news from Penang had not been paying proper

attention to the amount of alcohol he had been drinking. He had been absent-mindedly swallowing one glass of wine after another and now he was far from sober. He was bored with the Doctor and his chat about the Langfields: it seemed to him ridiculous and unworthy that they should be chatting in such a suburban vein at this historic moment when great events were brewing all around them, when a new and terrible link was being forged in the chain of events which reached back to the first betrayal of justice at the League. Instead they should be talking about, well … no matter *what*, provided it expressed one's real feelings. This was a moment to discuss matters which one does not normally mention on social occasions for fear of making oneself ridiculous or embarrassing one's friends; love and death, for example. Presently, inspired by Walter's claret, he decided that this might be a good moment in which to make the proposal of marriage to Joan which he had intended to make earlier in the afternoon. He looked at her: never had the modelling of her cheekbones seemed so exquisite! Never had her sable curls glowed more richly! He felt moved by her beauty, or perhaps it was simply by the wine and the spice of risk which had been added to life by the news from Penang. Suddenly, he pushed back his chair and stood up.

Silence fell around the table. The Blacketts gazed at him in surprise. He stood there for a moment without saying anything, leaning forward slightly with his knuckles on the polished surface of the table. 'A sad occasion,' muttered the Doctor at his side, looking rather put out, for Matthew had interrupted a choice anecdote by so boorishly rising to his feet. Matthew, while his audience waited, combed his mind for the various things he wanted to say … he knew what they were (they had been there only a moment ago), and he knew he must say them from the heart.

'Monty has told me,' he began at last, 'that for the past few days certain plans for Joan's wedding have been discussed and that these plans have included me. Well, this evening, it seems to me, we should for once in our lives speak out about our innermost feelings … And that's why I suddenly got up just now, I suppose it may have looked a bit odd, now I come to think of it … I think we should say, well … I think you see what I mean …'

The Blacketts stirred uneasily, by no means sure that they did see what he meant. Besides, Matthew had plainly had a few drinks too many. But still, he did sound as if he might be on the right lines as far as the wedding was concerned. Until now he had seemed thoroughly apathetic about the whole business, indeed, had not mentioned it at all, and that had been a strain, particularly for Walter and Joan, who could not quite decide whether to go ahead with final arrangements on the strength of what had been agreed already, or whether to wait for a more positive sign from Matthew.

'To you sitting around this table who knew my father rather better than I did, I'm afraid … I hope you don't mind if I call you "my dearest friends" … Well, I just wanted to say … and assure you that I do mean it …' Matthew, who had got a bit muddled, had to pause for a moment to straighten out exactly what was in his mind, to run a hot iron over his thoughts and smooth out any final contradictions in them. This was not difficult. He had to say what he really felt about the prospect of marrying Joan. And so it was that a moment later, to his own surprise he heard a rather far-off voice saying: 'I suppose I should have spoken up before in order to prevent a misunderstanding but, although I like Joan very much. I don't really want to marry her, if you see what I mean. Well, that's all I wanted to say.' And with that he sat down, feeling distinctly uncomfortable.

41

I returned to Singapore on the morning of 20 December and shortly afterwards issued a paper containing information of the Japanese tactics and instructions as to how they should be countered. In this I stressed that the first essential was rigid discipline and absolute steadiness and secondly, that the enemy's out-flanking and infiltration tactics must not lead to withdrawals which should only take place on the order of higher authority. I suggested that the best method of defence might be for a holding group to be dug in astride the main artery of communication with striking forces on the flanks ready to attack as soon as the enemy made contact with the holding group. With a view to trying to curb the many wild rumours which were flying about, aggravated by the difficulty of finding out what really was happening, I ordered that the spreading of rumours and exaggerated reports of the enemy's efficiency must be rigidly suppressed.

Lieutenant-General A. E. Percival,
The War in Malaya

JAPANESE BURNING KORAN IN NORTH

Refugees who have made their way out of Trengganu since the Japanese occupation bring a shocking story of sacrilege. They state that the Japanese broke into the Mohammedan religious school at Kuala Trengganu, capital of the state, ransacked it, threw the kitab-kitab (holy books) out of the window and desecrated the holy Koran. Further, they have set up their own idols in the Police Suran (place of worship) in Kuala Trengganu. This news, following on the bombing of the mosques in Penang and Kuala Lumpur, is causing Malays to recall bitterly that it is only a few weeks since the Tokio radio was broadcasting nightly assurances of special solicitude for Muslims and Muslim places of worship in Malay and elsewhere.

LULL IN MALAYA: NEW RAF SUCCESS

According to last night's official communiqué, the Japanese have not been able to maintain their pressure on the Perak front, where our patrols have been active.

RAIDS ON KUALA LUMPUR

Since their first raid on Kuala Lumpur town on Friday the Japanese have returned regularly every day. On Tuesday there were five alerts. The raiders are always met by heavy ack-ack fire. As a result they have not dared appear directly over the town and have not dropped any bombs since last Friday.

Straits Times Thursday, 1 January 1942

Now the New Year of 1942 began and life in Singapore underwent yet another frightening metamorphosis. Little by little people had grown accustomed to the darkness of the blacked-out streets and the military road-blocks, though they had not ceased to be an inconvenience. But now air-raids, sporadic at first and usually aimed at the docks and airfields, came to remind Singapore's inhabitants of the dangers they ran. And yet, when you thought about it, only a few days had passed since Singapore had been still enjoying the comfort and security of peace-time. How far away those pleasant days already seemed! These days, unless your character was unusually imperturbable, you found it hard to enjoy dining on the lawn of Raffles Hotel in the tropical night surrounded by the fan-shaped silhouettes of travellers' palms. By now people preferred to dine inside: for one thing there was no light to read the menu by if you stayed outside; for another, although it was still just as enchanting to listen to the sighing of the warm breeze as it tossed the ruffled heads of the nibong palms against the stars high above you, you could no longer be quite sure that the dark shape of a Japanese bomber was not lurking like a panther in those tossing palms and watching you with yellow eyes as you put your spoon into a *soufflé au fromage*. Besídes, sitting out there by yourself, could you be altogether certain that you would not find yourself sharing your *soufflé* with a Japanese parachutist?

For Europeans, these days, work swallowed up everything. For no sooner had you finished at the office than you were obliged to report for an evening's training with the passive defence and volunteer forces. If you were over the age of forty-one you now found yourself, unless exempted for some other essential work, serving with the volunteer police or firemen or with the Local Defence Corps. Nevertheless, it had taken Singapore's second air-raid on 29 December, and those that followed in ever more rapid succession, to make a real dent in Singapore's way of life. Sporting activities on the *padang* came to an end (to Matthew's inexperienced eye not the least astonishing thing about Singapore had been the sight of thirty grown men engaged in a violently energetic game of rugby a mere few miles from the equator): the municipal engineering department had erected obstacles to deny such open spaces to aircraft or paratroops. Supplies of tinned food were brought up and people began to improvise air-raid shelters in their gardens or in the less fragile parts of their homes.

Outwardly, perhaps, not so much had changed. You could still pause almost anywhere in the city, just as you had always done, and buy a refreshing slice of pineapple, or a bunch of tiny, delicious bananas no bigger than the fingers of your hand, or even, if you were adventurous, scoop out the fragrant, heavenly, alarming

flesh of the durian. Some people, no less adventurous, occasionally managed a round of golf under the air-raids, at least until golf links and club-house were taken over to be fortified by the Military despite a gallant rear-guard action by the Club Committee to save it for its members. Others sported and splashed in the wavelets at Tanjong Rhu while Japanese bombers raided Keppel Harbour across the water. Was this bravado or simply an illustration of the time it takes to change from the reality of peace to the new reality of war? Well, you were probably no less safe and a great deal more comfortable having a swim during an air-raid than sweltering in an improvised shelter.

The Major took tiffin one day in the first week of January with Dr Brownley at the Adelphi Hotel and was surprised to find that the hotel's orchestra was still playing its usual lunchtime concert of old favourites. The only interruption to his conversation with the Doctor, whom he was trying to persuade to provide a mobile medical service for the Mayfair A.F.S. unit, came when a drunken Australian journalist blundered into their table, asked: 'How's the tucker?' and blundered away again. The Major later glimpsed him vomiting into some palms in the lobby while the Swiss manager wrung his hands nearby. Still, considering it was wartime, it was not too much to put up with.

One thing, however, did come as a shock to the Major. He had expected that resentment towards the Forces, endemic for the past few years among European civilians, would be dissipated immediately by the opening of hostilities on the mainland. But on the contrary, it grew even more acute. The Military, it was felt, who were supposed to be defending Singapore's commercial activities, vital as a source of produce for the Empire and for the earning of dollars from America, were doing everything to make business impossible by their high-handed requisitioning of land and property. If the Army had had its way it would have made off with a sizeable part of the labour force into the bargain, to build the camps and fortifications which they should be building for themselves! What indignation would presently be caused in Singapore when (in the third week of January) the *Sunday Pictorial* in Britain published what the *Straits Times* called 'absurd allegations regarding whisky-swilling planters, indolent officials and greedy businessmen who refused to pay taxes.'

But as January pursues its course the civilians and the Military are at least united in one pastime in the increasingly devastated and dangerous city … they go to the cinema. They go to see *Private Affairs* with Nancy Kelly and Robert Cummings at the Cathay, or *Bad Men of Missouri* at the Alhambra, or Charlie Chaplin in *The Great Dictator* at the Roxy. Battered troops from up-country or new arrivals from Britain, Australia and India watch John Wayne in *Dark Command* at the Empire beside anxious and forlorn refugees from Penang and Kuala Lumpur. Together in the hot darkness they watch Joe E. Brown in *So You Won't Talk?, Mata Hari* with Greta Garbo and Ramon Novarro, and Henry Fonda in *The Return of Frank James* which, despite the boom and thud of bombs and anti-aircraft guns filtering into the cinema, has had all traces of gun-play removed by the Singapore censor in order not to give ideas to the city's Chinese gangsters. Perhaps as they sit there they are a little reassured by 'the first drama of Uncle Sam's new jump fighters': *Parachute Battalion* with Robert Preston and Edmund O'Brien … but no doubt they find parachutes too close to reality and prefer Loretta Young in *The Lady from Cheyenne*: 'It was a man's world until a low-cut gown took over the town.' They watch in silence with the light from the screen flickering on their strained faces. The week it is shown (by that time people will be wearing steel helmets in the stalls during air-raids) will see, on Tuesday, a massive raid by eighty-one Japanese Navy bombers on the Tanglin and Orchard. Road district and, on Wednesday, an even more devastating raid on Beach Road.

'*Pakai angku punia sarong muka!* Put on your gas-masks! *Jangan tembak sampai depat hukum!* Don't fire until you receive orders!' exclaimed the Major, stifling a yawn that threatened to have its way with him. '*Jaga itu periok api … bedil itu sudah letup*. Beware of bombs: the shell has exploded!' Such was the heat and humidity that a prodigious effort was required merely to keep one's eyes open. His head began to droop once more on to his chest. He forced himself to straighten up and say: *'Gali parit untok lima kaki tinggi. Kapal terbang tedak boleh naik sabab musim ribot*. Dig a trench about five feet high. The aeroplanes can't go up owing to stormy weather …' Again his head began to droop. There was a sudden crash and he sat up with a start. Dupigny had just hurled a book across the room at a fat, ginger cockroach which was making its way, glistening with health and horribly alert, across the wall of the outer office where they were sitting. The book had missed, however, and the cockroach darted away at an unnatural speed.

Revived by the noise, the Major put down the list of useful Malay phrases he had been trying to master and walked across to the window. The rain was pelting down on the broad, green banana leaves and sweeping down the drive in a river towards the storm-drain.

'Listen to this, Brendan,' chuckled Dupigny, who was sprawled in a rattan chair reading the *Straits Times*. ' "Newly arrived. Sandbags! Only a limited quantity available. Apply Hagemeyer Trading Company Ltd.' They have a vigorous commercial instinct, the people of Singapore!'

'Undoubtedly, François, the Japanese have gained some initial advantage,' said the Major who had been following his own train of thought. 'But I doubt if they will get much further.'

'*Sans blague!*'

'They had the advantage of surprise and that counts for a great deal. But the further they drive our chaps

back, the more concentrated our forces become … like a spring which is being compressed. In due course we'll spring back all the more powerfully.'

'*Sans blague!*'

'Would you mind not saying "*sans blague*" all the time? It gets on my nerves.'

'Sorry.'

It had grown very dark outside and the rain fell so heavily that it filled the room with a noise like a roll of drums. Through a crack in the floorboards the Major could see a sheet of rainwater sliding under the bungalow between the pillars on which it stood. From time to time a flash of lightning lit up Dupigny's face across the room, a cynical mass of wrinkles. He had put down the newspaper which he could no longer see to read.

'What a storm!' said Matthew, wandering in from his office next door and joining the Major at the window.

'They don't usually last very long,' said the Major. He added presently: 'By the way, Mr Wu was here earlier and said he had heard there had been more trouble up-country.' The Major, though he did not say so, was afraid that Malaya might be beginning to fall to pieces. Nor was it simply a question of the military situation. He explained to Matthew what he had heard.

Last week there had been talk of Australian troops wrecking a hotel somewhere. Now rumours had reached Mr Wu, who had business contacts in Penang, Kuala Lumpur, Ipoh and Kuantan, that civil disorder, looting and inter-racial strife was spreading like a shock-wave in front of the advancing Japanese bayonets. In some places the retreating British troops, instructed to destroy stores that might be of value to the enemy, had set the example by looting jewellers and liquor shops, eagerly assisted by the local population and even by the police who had discarded their uniforms and joined in with a will. Open season had been declared on anything of value left behind. A cloud of locusts descended on every abandoned European bungalow: in no time it was stripped of everything down to light-bulbs, door-handles and bathroom fittings. When European bungalows had all been stripped the looters turned to those abandoned by rich Chinese, Indians and Malays … and, presently, to those that had *not* been abandoned, stripping them regardless and, if the owner did not promptly produce his valuables, torturing him until he did. Sometimes, according to Mr Wu's all too circumstantial and convincing account, Chinese looters would wear masks, or pretend to be Japanese soldiers; sometimes two rival bands of looters would arrive to sack the same premises, which now included Government rice godowns, Land offices and Customs premises, and do battle with each other for the right to pillage. And all this accompanied by wholesale violence and rape, not to mention old scores being paid off. The country was foundering in anarchy!

'What do you expect to happen?' asked Dupigny, dismissing the matter with a shrug. 'I do not see why you should be surprised.'

'But wait, François. The laws of a country are merely the wish of people to live in a certain way. Remove the laws for a few days and you don't expect anarchy to result overnight, any more than by abolishing road regulations you would expect motorists to pick at random which side of the road they would drive on. Laws aren't a means of coercing a population of wild animals but an agreement between people … D'you see what I mean? But in that case why has this moral vacuum appeared in the space between the two armies where the rule of law is suspended? It must mean that all these people looting and raping don't consider themselves to belong to our community at all!'

'But exactly!' cried Dupigny and a flash of lightning lit up his sardonic smile. 'In a country like Malaya such an ideal community is impossible because people belong to different races and only have self-interest in common. A brotherhood of man? Rubbish! But let us not complain, self-interest is the surest source of wealth as your Mr Smith has so brilliantly demonstrated.'

'Do you really believe, François, that until now our British laws have merely been preventing people here from doing what they would most like to do, namely: attack, rob and rape their neighbours? Come now!'

'Certainly. Today you have the proof!'

Instead of replying, the Major stooped and held out his fingers to The Human Condition who was hesitating prudently a few feet away, as if afraid that the Major might be about to scoop him up and drop him into an incinerator. After some moments of interior debate the animal crept a little closer and faintly wagged its wretched tail. The Major sighed. Outside the window the first thin shaft of sunlight broke through the cloud and hung quivering in the murky gloom of the drive, at the same time striking emerald sparks from a dripping banana leaf.

Matthew, who had spent a little time with his hands in his pockets at the window, staring out in a gloomy reverie at the drenched foliage, had become interested in this discussion. He remembered with what pleasure he had watched the mingling of races on the dance-floor at The Great World. It was surely true that to build a nation out of Malaya's plural society some greater ideal than the profit of plantation owners, merchants and assorted entrepreneurs combined with the accumulation of wealth by the labour force, was required. What was needed was *a new spirit* … the spirit that had animated people at Geneva in the early days before everything had turned sour. Matthew began, haltingly, to explain this to the Major and Dupigny. It was simply a question of breaking out of old habits of thought! It was so easy, given the right atmosphere, for people to change the way they approached each other! Even apparently self-interested people were capable of it. It was like … like … He groped the air with his fingers, searching for an example. Yes, it was like someone in the

empty compartment of a train who pulls down the blinds and puts his suitcases on the seat to prevent another passenger sharing it with him. Yet if, once installed, the newcomer should become ill the original occupant will spare no effort to help him, will take off his jacket, perhaps, to spread it over him, will stop the train and bully officials into coming to his companion's assistance, and go to all manner of trouble! It was a fact! And truly there was no earthly reason why all human affairs should not be conducted in this manner! It was just as available to people as conduct based on suspicion and self-interest. Even with the Japanese it would have been possible if they had not been infected with our own cynical approach to power.

'I refuse to believe that self-interest is the best source of prosperity. It only *seems* that way because we've never been able to break out of this bad habit with which we've been shackled by our history. Men are capable of becoming brothers, whatever you say, François. And I'm sure you'll find, once this dreadful war is over, that thousands of people of different races have been willing to risk their lives for each other!'

While Matthew, stuttering with excitement, had been stating his belief, his companions had been listening, the Major dubiously, Dupigny with derision. Now Dupigny got to his feet: it was time for his late afternoon siesta on the table in the Board Room, the only room in the building which possessed an efficient fan. On his way out he paused to pat Matthew on the shoulder, saying with a laugh: 'You might just as well expect stockbrokers to be ready to die for the Stock Exchange!'

42

It was in these days that members of the Mayfair AFS unit first began to be seen at fires here and there in the city with their glistening new trailer-pump. Nothing spectacular at first while they were learning the business; a shop-house or a godown, perhaps, set on fire by an air-raid on the docks. A tiny convoy would set off led by the Major's Lagonda driven by the Major himself, keeping an eye on the trailer-pump dodging and swaying in the rear-view mirror, and followed by Mr Wu's ancient Buick, crammed with helmeted figures and equipment. Sometimes, as the fires grew bigger, they would find a number of other units there, too, and as they arrived they would have to bump over several hose-ramps while trying to locate the officer in charge of the fire. Quite often this would turn out to be a man called Adamson who, they learned from some of the regular firemen, had an unusual reputation for skill in beating back or outflanking fires that threatened to get out of control … the reputation of a general, one might have thought. His appearance, though, was disappointingly ordinary … a rather anonymous-looking individual in his forties with bristly grey hair and a manner that suggested more a curious by-stander than a general on a battlefield. Matthew, in particular, surveyed him with interest, wondering how it was that so many legends hat attached themselves to him.

At one godown fire, while Matthew was talking to a man called Evans from the Central Fire Station in Hill Street, there came a shout of 'Stand from under!'

'That means the façade is about to topple,' Evans explained and together they joined the other men drifting back to a safer distance. Evans, however, was watching Adamson who still lingered beneath the building, staring up at it, hands in pockets. There was a story, he told Matthew, that Adamson had once been caught at just such a moment under a tall façade as it toppled outwards over him. Because it had been too late to run he had calmly estimated where an open window would fall, had changed his position slightly and then stood still. The façade had fallen neatly around him, leaving him untouched.

'Great Scott!' Matthew gazed at Adamson, deeply impressed by such sang-froid, but at the same time half suspecting that this might be just a story which old hands told to new recruits like himself.

Despite the satisfaction Matthew experienced these days in the knowledge that he was doing his bit for the Colony, and even putting himself at risk for it, he was still not altogether pleased with himself. His relations with the Blackett family had been seriously clouded by the unfortunate manner in which he had announced that he did not want to marry Joan. How could he have done such a thing? The Blacketts were his father's life-long friends! Now he flushed with embarrassment at the mere recollection of his dreadful behaviour. Naturally, he had written notes of apology to Walter, to Mrs Blackett, and to Joan herself (how could he have been so insensitive as to reject the poor girl in public!) … but he had heard nothing and did not expect to be forgiven for his appalling lapse.

He would have written a note to Monty, too, but Monty had turned up in person before he could do so and, as a matter of fact, did not appear to be particularly put out. Monty, indeed, was inclined to look on the bright side and said, chuckling: 'Boy, you've really put your foot in it this time. They aren't very pleased with you at home, to put it mildly! But at least you've got rid of all the bloody bridesmaids! Frankly, old chap, I hand it to you … I didn't think you had it in you.' But Matthew was not to be consoled. It was true that he did not now have to marry Joan … but such was his remorse that he would almost have preferred to have done so.

Presently, a hastily written message from Walter did arrive and Matthew opened it expecting recriminations. But to his surprise the message did not even mention his lapse and one might even have supposed, reading it, that Walter had already forgotten about it. The note begged Matthew, in the name of his country and of everything he held dear, to reconsider his refusal to impersonate Continuity in Blackett and Webb's jubilee parade. 'Since the loss of Penang,' wrote Walter, 'it has become more necessary than ever to shore up the morale of the Asiatic communities in the Colony by a display of firmness and a reminder of our

past association which has been so fruitful to them.' Because of 'recent events' it had been necessary to postpone the jubilee parade and celebrations, but 'any day now' final arrangements would be made. In the meantime, Matthew was asked to come with the Major and Dupigny to a dress rehearsal for the parade to make sure that everybody knew what was expected of him.

This note had been dictated in a rather discursive style and typed on Walter's office note-paper. Walter had added a cryptic postscript in ink, however, which stated: 'I hear young Lang-field has not been doing *too badly* as a fireman. What d'you think? Perhaps he is not as bad as the rest of *that gang?*' Matthew was relieved to get Walter's note, though a little puzzled by the reference to Nigel Langfield: Walter musing aloud, it seemed. He hastily sent a note in return, agreeing to do anything Walter wanted. After his lapse there was nothing else for him to do, after all.

His conscience lightened somewhat by this exchange, Matthew decided to take the afternoon off. His efforts to grasp the complexities of the rubber business took second place these days, in any case, to his duties as a fireman. Besides, he still hardly knew Singapore.

The Major, who had to pick up an order of books from Kelly and Walsh's, dropped him near Raffles Place and he set off, hands in pockets, with no particular destination. First he walked down Market Street. It was here, he remembered, that Ehrendorf had his flat but as to which number it was in the street he had no idea. As he strolled along he was suddenly enveloped in a delightful smell of cloves and cinnamon which hung outside a spice merchant's. On the opposite side of the street his eye was caught by the money-lenders shops and he paused for a moment to stare in wonder and dismay at the white-garmented figures lurking in those dim interiors. What did this glimpse of money-lenders remind him of? Yes. He moved on once more, pondering the assertion that self-interest is the most efficient producer of wealth, that what an undeveloped tropical country most needed were entrepreneurs like his father and like Walter. Many people believed, he was aware, that no matter what an individual entrepreneur might accomplish in the way of exploitation or abuse of native labour, his presence was still beneficial to the country as the most effective means by which the local population could begin to accumuate capital of its own. This paradox, which was no doubt true within limits, was accompanied by a cynical companion in the form of another assertion: namely, that human beings would only produce their best efforts when they were working, not for the community in which they lived, but for themselves. This Matthew *refused to believe*!

He had paused, muttering under his breath, in the doorway of a metalwork shop where he found himself gazing at his own perspiring, bespectacled face upside down in a gleaming concave bowl. Inside the shop he could see a man on his hands and knees cutting out a long strip of metal to make a bucket; another man, cross-legged, sat on the floor hammering rivets into another strip which had been bent into a cylinder. Beside them glistened a pile of newly minted buckets. To produce such handsome buckets without even a work-bench, using only primitive tools, seemed to him miraculous.

He walked on at random, now northwards, now westwards. He passed a sign which read Nanyang Dentist and the dentist himself, perhaps, sitting in his white coat on the pavement smoking a cigarette. A ginger cat with a docked tail crossed his path and slipped hopefully under the bead-hung entrance to the North Pole Creamery. A Chinese song blared tinnily from a wireless somewhere above his head in the forest of poles and washing; two voices gabbled in different languages riddled with atmospheric from two other wirelesses nearby. He passed on to the street corner where a Chinese funeral, which he at first took for a parade, was getting down to business outside a shop-house. A framed photograph of the dead man had been set up on a table on the pavement, a prosperous-looking fellow wearing the most formal of Western blue suits and white shirts; two tall lamps swathed in sackcloth for the occasion flanked the photograph: piles of oranges and apples and bundles of smoking joss-sticks stood in front of it. At the side of this table was another; Matthew found himself confronted with a great lobster-coloured pig's mask complete with ears and flaring nostrils, crabs, whole naked chickens, some squashed as flat as plates, very greasy-looking, others with their yellow waxen heads horribly bent back over their bodies.

Matthew looked at his watch: he would soon have to be getting back to the Mayfair for something to eat before the night's watch. He lingered for a moment, however, to inspect the paper models of a motor-car, a wireless, a refrigerator and other useful articles that the dead man would be taking on his journey, thinking: 'After all, if these are the things people want and entrepreneurs like my father help them to get them …' He wondered what the head man had thought of it all, whether he had been satisfied. Here he was, presumably, in this impressive coffin which might, to judge by its size, have been hollowed out of a substantial tree trunk, each end swept up like the prow of a ship and standing on trestles which advertised, in English and Chinese, the name and telephone number of the undertaker. A line of professional mourners dressed in crudely stitched sackcloth sat on the kerb, smoking cigarettes and looking disaffected. A small boy hammered on a tin drum and was now joined by a rather down-at-heel brass band of elderly men in white uniforms who struck up raggedly for a few moments. An aeroplane roared by very low overhead and the mourners looked up apprehensively … but it was British, a Catalina flying-boat. Matthew walked on thoughtfully. As he walked, hands in pockets, he felt someone take his arm. Looking round he saw Miss Chiang's smiling face.

'Vera! Where have you been? Why haven't you been back to the Mayfair?'

Vera's smile disappeared; she looked a trifle upset. She said with a shrug: 'They told me not to come back.'

'Who told you?'

‘A man from Mr Blackett’s office.’ She shrugged again. ‘It does not matter. It is not in the least “pressing”. Tell me about yourself … I’m so glad to see you are now well again. What a terrible fever! You gave me such a fright. I was afraid you might “kick the bucket”.’

‘But *why* did they tell you not to come back?’

‘They say my job has been finished. They bring me suitcase and money and a letter of thanks signed by Miss Blackett. I think it is because she is jealous of my beauty.’

‘D’you really think so? Lumme!’ Matthew mopped his perspiring face with a handkerchief.

‘Yes,’ went on Vera, looking pretty and malicious, yet at the same time more innocent than ever, ‘it is because also she does not have my command of foreign languages and because my breasts are bigger than hers. She does not have my poise, either, which I have probably inherited from my mother … I think I told you my mother was Russian princess, forced to show “clean heels” during Revolution. Well, there … it is not worth bothering about.’

Meanwhile, they had strolled on together and, after a moment’s hesitation, Vera had taken his arm again and her light hand resting in the hollow of his elbow caused a delicate warmth to flow into him. Some women, he could not help thinking, were extraordinarily good at touching you, while others did so as if they had had a recently dislocated arm (no doubt women found the same about men). Vera’s touch was as distinctive as her voice. At the end of the street, however, they discovered that they were obliged to go in different directions, which seemed a pity. They lingered there for a moment.

‘You must halt …’ said Vera with a sigh. ‘I must go on because my silk-worms are hungry.’

‘What? You have silk-worms?’ cried Matthew, thinking: ‘How delightfully Chinese!’

‘Oh no, here in Singapore it is too hot for silk-worms.’ She smiled flirtatiously. ‘It is a line from an old Chinese song about a woman who is separated from her lover.’

‘Well, let me see …’ Matthew again looked at his watch. ‘Can I invite you to a cup of tea?’

‘Thank you, but first I must visit a friend who is dying. Will you come with me?’

Presently, Matthew found himself standing in a vast dimly lit shed, blinking and polishing his spectacles; but even when he had put them on again, such was the contrast with the brightness outside, he still could not see very well. Vera had set off down a sort of aisle on each side of which rose tier after tier of shadowy racks, as in a store-house or wine-cellar. Matthew followed her, stepping uncertainly. There was a smell of humanity here and a faint, twittering murmur of voices.

As his vision improved he saw that the racks on either side were occupied by recumbent forms, some of which stirred slightly as he passed but for the most part lying still … Eyes followed him incuriously, the sunken eyes of very elderly, emaciated people; here and there he made out a somewhat younger face. Vera explained to him that this was a Chinese ‘dying-house’ where lonely people came to die. He had not wanted to come; he had tried to explain to Vera that he had only just finished watching a funeral. It seemed to him that his life had taken a decidely lugubrious turn all of a sudden. No, he would definitely prefer to wait for her outside.

But as they were walking Vera had told him a little about the old man she was going to visit. He had befriended her on the boat that had taken her from Shanghai to Singapore (that same boat on which Miss Blackett and her mother had been travelling), had given her a little money and had helped her to find her feet; his own children had died or disappeared in one of the civil wars that had swept back and forth over China since the fall of the Manchu dynasty. While talking about this man, to whom she was bringing a little parcel of food, Vera happened to mention that until he had grown too old to work he had lived by tapping his few rubber trees on a smallholding near Layang Layang in Johore. Matthew had pricked up his ears at this and exclaimed: ‘That’s near my own estate!’ And so, despite his misgivings, he had decided to enter the dying-house with her. Now, blundering between these racks of moribund people in the gloom, he felt like Orpheus descending into the underworld.

It was not only the lonely who came to die here, explained Vera in a low voice, grasping him by the sleeve, but a great many others, too. People were brought here to die by their families in order to spare the home from the bad luck that comes when somebody dies there …

‘I must say, that sounds a bit heartless!’

Yes, and yet it was accepted by the person who was dying as the best thing to do and the custom had been carried on, perhaps, for generations. And no doubt those who came here from the land of the living to bring food and water to their dying relations would in due course come to spend their own last days or hours here, rather than take up room in one of the crowded tenement cubicles or boats on the river … It was very sad, certainly, but it was moving, too, to see the way these shelves of dying people accepted their fate. Vera’s dark eyes searched Matthew’s face to see whether he understood. He nodded cautiously though, as a matter of fact, he was not very keen on hearing of people ‘accepting their fate’. Vera seemed to him extraordinarily full of life by contrast with the trays of shadowy expiring figures on either side. ‘What a dismal way to end up though!’

‘How attractive he is!’ Vera was thinking. ‘How stooping and shortsighted! What deliciously round shoulders and unhealthy complexion!’ She gazed at him in wonder, reflecting that there was no way in which he could be improved. Indeed, she could hardly keep her eyes off him. For the fact was that Vera had been brought up, as Chinese girls had been for centuries, to find stooping, bespectacled, scholarly-looking young

men attractive, and the more literary the better; no doubt there was an economic motive originally buried somewhere beneath this tradition of finding attractive qualities in poor physical specimens like Matthew (although, actually, *he* was quite strong): for until recently with the fall of the Ch'ing dynasty all China's most powerful administrators and officials, a source of prosperity and glory for their families as well as themselves, had been chosen traditionally by competitive examinations in literary subjects open to rich and poor alike. Already though, a willingness to have their heart-strings plucked in such a way was beginning to seem old-fashioned to the young women of the New China. Yes, already by January 1942, young men with rippling muscles, fists of steel and a good posture were beginning to barge these spindle-legged weaklings aside and leave them grovelling in the dust for their spectacles while *they*, instead, installed themselves in maidenly dreams from Shanghai to Sinkiang. How lucky then for Matthew, who was just in time to catch Vera's eye. He would not have cut much ice with one of these others. As a matter of fact, she had already begun to notice one or two young men with fists of steel who perhaps did not look *too* unprepossessing.

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Vera had paused for a moment to talk to a middle-aged man sitting on his heels beside someone on the lowest rack; he was wearing a cheap, crumpled European suit whose pockets were bulging with packages of various kinds; a stethoscope hung over his open-necked white shirt. As he was talking he looked up briefly at Matthew and smiled: his face, which was deeply lined and cross-hatched, conveyed a strong impression of sensitivity and strength of character. As they walked on again, it occurred to Matthew that if you could tell someone's character by his face, even without sharing a culture or language with him, perhaps people of different nations and races were not so deeply divided from each other as they appeared to be, that whatever Dupigny might think, there *was* such a thing as shared humanity, and that with one or two minor adjustments different nations and communities could live in harmony with each other, concerning themselves with each other's welfare.

The doctor she had just spoken to, Vera explained, devoted all his spare time and money to treating the inmates of the dying-house who could not otherwise afford medical attention.

'Of course he does!' exclaimed Matthew excitedly. 'You only have to look at his face to know that!' He would hardly have believed her if she had suggested anything else. Oppressed as he was by Dupigny's cynical views on human nature, he felt quite delighted to have stumbled on this lonely philanthropist. Vera, meanwhile, was indicating in a whisper that those inhabitants of the dying-house who were actually expiring were brought down to the floor level because it was believed that anyone below a dying person would be visited by bad luck.

After a moment of uncertainty while she peered in the gloom at one elderly Chinese face after another (each shrivelled and puckered like an old apple and, to Matthew, almost indistinguishable) Vera had made her selection and was kneeling by a frail figure where it was darkest at the end of the row. Matthew approached, too, and gazed with interest and sympathy at the wizened head which lay, not on a pillow, but on a small bundle, perhaps of clothing. At the touch of Vera's hand on his arm, the old man's eyes opened slowly. He surveyed her calmly, remotely, showing no sign of surprise or animation. But presently he murmured something. A faint conversation ensued. Once, very slowly, his eyes moved towards Matthew. Vera's parcel contained a small bowl of rice, mushrooms and sea-slugs. A boy appeared with a pot of tea and Vera gave him a coin. Meanwhile the old man's withered hand had been groping feebly at his bedside and presently closed over a pair of chopsticks. Vera took them from him and helped him to eat a few mouthfuls from the bowl.

When he had finished eating the old man again looked at Matthew and said something to Vera. Vera, too, looked at Matthew and replied with a smile, saying then in English: 'I tell him you are in rubber business.'

The old man spoke again, this time to Matthew, in a faint, grumbling voice.

'What does he say?'

'He ask you where your estates are … I tell him you son of Blackett and Webb.'

Matthew nodded and smiled winningly at the old Chinese, delighted to think that he was at last, thanks to Vera, coming into contact with the real roots of life in Malaya, not just its top dressing of Europeans.

But despite Matthew's winning smiles the old fellow on his death-bed did not altogether give the impression of being won over. Indeed, he had begun to fidget restlessly on his tray, muttering indignantly. Matthew was not sure but he thought he could make out the words 'Brackett and Webb' recurring in the old chap's mutterings. Vera was listening attentively: her face showed concern.

'Well, oh dear … He say you swindle smallholders. He says European estates swindle him and other smallholders …'

'Oh really, Vera!' scoffed Matthew. 'The poor old blighter's just wool-gathering. But I can see my presence is upsetting him so perhaps I'd better …' He was afraid that the elderly Chinese, who was now searching crossly with trembling, skeletal hands for something in the pile of rags he was using as a pillow, might suffer some terminal seizure brought on by excitement and indignation. To judge by his wasted body and blue lips it would not take very much to capsize the frail craft in which the old chap was now trying to navigate the final stages of his life's voyage. Still, something caused Matthew to linger. Until now he had not given much

thought to native smallholders. Their smallholdings seldom amounted to more than a few acres, at most. And yet, now he thought about it, these native smallholdings together produced nearly half of Malaya's rubber and covered almost a million and a quarter acres! 'What's he saying now?' he asked uneasily.

'He says British steal money from his rubber trees.'

'How did they do that?' asked Matthew dubiously. Vera turned back to the old man who had fallen back now, exhausted by his efforts to find whatever it was he had been looking for. He was no longer looking at Matthew but into the distance; his chest hardly seemed to move but still that faint, grumbling voice went on and on, rising and falling, almost like the wind when it sighs under a doorway.

'He says the inspector did not give him proper share of rubber to sell when he came to look at his trees for Restriction Scheme …'

'I suppose he means when his production was being assessed before the scheme started … to see what his share of the total export rights would be. All right, go on.'

'It was the same with other smallholders in this village, too. Inspector says he tells a lie how much rubber his trees are making, that they are too thickly planted to make so much rubber. He says inspectors are Europeans who work for the estates and do not want smallholders to get their proper share …'

'Well, good gracious! Tell him … tell him …' But Matthew could not think what Vera should tell him. 'What a disagreeable old codger!' he thought, taken aback by this list of complaints. 'You'd think that at death's door he'd have better things to think about. There might be some truth in it, mind you … but all the same!' Matthew had discovered that he did not mind being critical of the British himself, but when a foreigner was critical, that was different. And, after all, he had ventured into this decidedly creepy place merely to pay his respects to the old blighter!

But in spite of natural feelings of indignation that the old chap should pick a quarrel with him on what was really a social occasion (paying of respects to someone on the point of cashing in his chips), there was an aspect of the matter which Matthew, in spite of himself, did find rather interesting. For he had already been struck by the fact there there was one significant difference between the production of rubber and the production of most other things … namely, there was little advantage in cost to those who operated on a big scale with several hundred or more acres. Those who produce corn, say, or motor-cars on a large scale can usually do so more cheaply than their smaller competitors. Not so with rubber where a method of mass-production using machinery had yet to be discovered. If anything, the native smallholder, who as well as tapping his few rubber trees could very often keep himself by growing fruit and vegetables and raising a few chickens, should be able to produce rubber *more* cheaply than the European estates which were obliged to pay and feed a large work-force of tappers, weeders, foremen and other estate workers, not to mention the even more expensive European managers, agents, secretaries and, ultimately, company directors and shareholders.

Matthew now remembered the discussion he had had with Ehrendorf (it seemed ages ago but was, in fact, only a few days) at The Great World, when they had been trying to decide to what extent the coming of Western capital to Britain's tropical colonies had had the benefits that were claimed for it. Well, the relationship between the European estates and the native smallholders seemed to throw an interesting light on that discussion. It was obvious that in most cases, although natives could be employed by Western enterprise, they lacked the knowledge, skill and capital to compete directly with it. But in the case of rubber, by a happy coincidence this was not so. There was nothing in the growing and tapping of trees, in the coagulation of latex by adding acid, or in the mangling and smoking of the resulting rubber sheets, that could not be done as easily by an illiterate Malay or Chinese as by a graduate of a British agricultural college. If the Colonial Office and the Government here really had the interests of their native subjects at heart, and not merely their exploitation as cheap labour, they could hardly have been presented with a better opportunity of demonstrating it by promoting and defending their interests! But wait! What was this he was hearing (for the old man's quavering sing-song, while Matthew had been brooding on these matters, had not ceased its gentle sighing like the wind coming under the door)?

'He says that European estates were given an extra share for trees that were too young to make rubber … Smallholders were given nothing.' Vera looked at him helplessly, embarrassed by this litany of complaints. 'He says European inspectors never looked properly at trees. He says there were only twenty inspectors for whole of Malaya. He says nobody inspected the estates. The estates told the Controller of Rubber how much share they wanted and Controller did as they say. He says Controller of Rubber was friendly to estates, not friendly to smallholders!'

'Quite true, sir,' piped up another quavering voice at Matthew's elbow, causing him to start violently and peer into the gloom where another of the shadowy cadavers, hitherto lying supine on the lowest rack and displaying no-signs of life, had now collected up two sets of bones and thrown them over the side of his tray; after dangling uncertainly for a while they anchored themselves to the floor and proved to be legs; then, with a further scraping of bones, their owner levered himself politely to his feet and stood swaying beside Matthew. 'Quite true, sir. Controller of Rubber listen only to European estates. He have five men on his committee from estates … only one smallholder! On his Rubber Regulation Committee he have *twenty-seven* men from estates, still only *one* from smallholders. And yet smallholders produce half country's rubber! That is not fair, sir. It is disgusting. Quite true, sir.' And he sank back with a moan into the shadows and a moment later there came a faint rattling sound. 'Oh dear,' thought Matthew, 'but still, he's probably had a good innings.'

Meanwhile, the speaker's place had been taken by other shadowy figures and Vera, tugging at his arm, was anxious to gain his attention because the sighing, sing-song voice of her friend had not ceased all this time and by now had built up a considerable backlog of complaints. 'He says Rubber Research Institute run by Government does not help smallholders, it helps only estates. He says smallholders pay for Institute from taxes just like European estates, but Institute only gives new, very good rubber plants to estates! What they call 'budwood" …'

'He means these new high-yielding clones?'

'Yes, budwood … he means new clones … He telling truth!' sang a chorus of skeletons and moribunds who had crowded around Matthew and were tugging at his garments to attract his attention …

'He says smallholders producing more rubber per acre than estates but given much smaller share!'

'Look here, Vera, I'm afraid I shall have to be going now. I'm on duty this evening and I'm late already …'

'He says bloody big swindle … he says …'

For the past few moments, extenuated though he was by his long list of complaints, Vera's friend had resumed his petulant search in the bundle of rags he was using as a pillow; now, with a final effort which seemed as if it might capsize him completely, his trembling fingers had fastened on what they were looking for. This proved to be a yellowing page of newsprint which he held up, quivering, to Matthew. Matthew took it, straining his eyes in the half-light to see what it was. He could just make out that it was the editorial opinion of *The Planter* and that the date on the top of the page was June 1930. 'I'm afraid I can't quite see what it says,' he murmured apologetically. But one of the skeletons at his shoulder, with a prodigious effort which seemed to drain him of his last resources of energy, had succeeded in dragging the head of a match against the sandpaper of a matchbox held in the shaking hands of two of his companions. The match flared. Matthew read aloud as rapidly as he could …

' "In the hands of the producers of budwood …" '

'He means Government Research Institute …'

'I say, please don't interrupt me because otherwise I won't be able to finish this before the match goes out,' protested Matthew. 'Well where was I … "In the hands of the producers of budwood lies the decision whether rubber planting will, in the far and remote future, become a native industry, or remain an asset of immense value to those European races to whose administrative skill and financial acumen … (Oh dear, I don't like the sound of this) … the development of Malaya and of the Dutch East Indies has been due …" '

'More, sir, more!' croaked his audience.

' "… It is the honest unbiased opinion of many leading men outside the rubber industry that the less the smallholder has to do with rubber the better it will be in the long run for himself and for all others engaged in rubber production …" ' The match died. Matthew was left with the piece of paper in his fingers. He sighed.

All around him in the semi-darkness, as if summoned by the last trump for a final dispensation of justice over the doings of this imperfect world, supine figures were sitting up and casting off their shrouds and bandages, while others were clambering down from the tiers of shelves on which they had been stretched. He sighed again and looked down at his watch as they crowded round him.

44

Towards the end of the year Sir Robert Brooke-Popham had been replaced as Commander-in-Chief Far East by General Pownall. Although he had been on friendly terms with Brooke-Popham and his successor was unknown to him, Walter was nevertheless relieved to see the departure of his friend for it had grown increasingly clear that Brooke-Popham was not comfortable in the rôle to which he had been assigned. But if this change of commanders had been expected to exert a beneficial effect on the course of the campaign there was no immediate sign of it, at least to the eyes of a civilian onlooker. By now, in any case, the most crucial military decisions had to be taken within the borders of Malaya itself, and thus the responsibility for making them fell to General Percival and his staff at Malaya Command.

The departure of Brooke-Popham did have a disadvantage for Walter, though, in that it removed the one person from whom he could have found out, in general if not in particular, how the campaign was going. If there was going to be trouble in Singapore, and despite the confident tone of the daily communiqués it was growing increasingly clear that there *was* going to be, Walter wanted to make sure that his womenfolk were removed to a place of safety in plenty of time. But he was not only worried about his wife, Joan and Kate: he was also worried about the rubber which still crammed his godowns at the docks, for the greater part of which he had still been unable to arrange shipping. To make matters worse, this rubber was increasingly in danger from air-raids. He would have liked to have taken Brooke-Popham for a stroll round the Orchid Garden and asked him, man to man, when RAF reinforcements were going to arrive and do something about these raids. Because something would have to be done about them, that much was clear. Otherwise the whole of Singapore would go up in flames and nobody could do a thing about it. He would have liked to approach, if not Brooke-Popham, then someone on Percival's staff. But Malaya Command did not have much time for Walter these days. They were too busy doing whatever it was they were doing up-country. 'Not like it was a few months ago,' he grumbled to his wife, 'when they were willing enough to drink my *pahits*.'

Mrs Blackett herself was frantic with worry for her younger brother, Charlie, who had gone to rejoin his regiment across the Causeway and had not been seen since. This was not such a bad thing, in Walter's view, but he did what he could to allay her fears, pointing out that it was perfectly normal for soldiers not to be heard from when they were fighting the enemy, particularly in the jungle. Could he not approach General Percival and ask him to have Charlie sent back to Singapore? she wanted to know. 'My dear, I don't even know the fellow,' Walter replied, showing signs of exasperation, 'and even if I did I could hardly ask him *that*. It might just be possible, if I knew Percival, to ask him to move Charlie towards the enemy, but I couldn't possibly ask him to move him in the opposite direction. He's a soldier, my dear. That's his job. That's what he's there for. I can't see why you should want him not to do his blessed job!'

'But surely, Walter,' cried Mrs Blackett, close to tears. 'There must have been some terrible fighting … I hear that wounded men are arriving every day at the railway station by the hundreds and if the Japanese have captured Penang …'

'Percival has too much on his mind, Sylvia, and there's an end of it,' said Walter crossly.

'But you don't know if you haven't tried!'

Walter, however, was quite right. General Percival did have a great deal on his mind. After the débâcle at Jitra the British forces had withdrawn behind the Perak River. But there was a snag about the Perak River, for it flowed in the wrong direction from north to south in the direction of the Japanese advance rather than from east to west, across it. Unfortunately for Percival, however, a position any farther north would have been made untenable by that same Japanese unit which had landed at Patani and, by snatching the Ledge, had earlier threatened the communications of the doomed position of Jitra. This force, by continuing to advance parallel to the main Japanese thrust, which was coming down the trunk road, had maintained its threat of turning the right flank of any new defensive line. As the Japanese Army advanced, therefore, so did this menacing shadow beside it.

But why had this second force been allowed to shadow the main force along the trunk road? The reason was that the British commanders had considered that the terrain did not permit such a manoeuvre, omitting from their calculations a certain unmetalled road which they thought unsuitable for mechanized transport (and so it was, though by no means impassable for infantry advancing on foot or on bicycles). This road headed straight in the direction the Japanese wanted to go, towards Kuala Kangsar. The fact was that from the very beginning of the Campaign this force from Patani had supplied the loose thread which was causing the British defences to unravel right down the peninsula.

At last, however, at Kuala Kangsar this particular loose thread came to an end and the British right flank was secured by the solid stitching of Malaya's mountainous spine. But even now, with the mountains at his elbow, Percival felt another retreat was necessary because, alas, the Japanese could use the Perak River to penetrate any defences established north of Telok Anson. And so, in due course and after a further withdrawal, new defensive positions had been prepared in the region of the border between Perak and Selangor on the Slim River, and also to the north and south of it.

It sometimes happens in a dream that you find, as if by coincidence, that all the fears you have when awake are improbably realized one after another. This dismaying sensation of events having tumbled together *not really by accident* but in a way specially designed to deprive you of all hope, which normally only takes advantage of a dreamer's gullibility, for the British commanders had moved out of a nightmare into reality: having at long last escaped from what had been threatening them hitherto, they now found with relentless dream-logic that this apparently secure position on the Slim River was threatened from a completely different direction.

That very circumstance which the Major had feared in the first week of the campaign on hearing that the *Prince of Wales* and the *Repulse* had been sunk had materialized. Thanks to their virtually complete control of both sea and air the Japanese were now in a position to land as they pleased on the thinly defended west coast (on the east coast, too, come to that). To make matters worse this fragile military situation had to be contained in some way by the men of the exhausted 11th Division although, as it happened, Percival had at his disposal the fresh troops of the 9th Division on the other side of the mountains on the east coast: their job was the defence of the airfield at Kuantan and the denial of Mersing against possible landings, both tasks rendered pointless in the event by the collapse in the west. It was this same unfortunate 11th Division which had been obliged to wait in the rain at the very start of the campaign three weeks earlier while Brooke-Popham pondered his pre-emptive advance into Siam. Those fresh and confident troops waiting for the signal to advance and give the Japanese a thrashing would have been hard to recognize in the somnambulant men wearily digging themselves in and putting up anti-tank obstacles at the Slim River; even Mrs Blackett's brother, Charlie, though his stay in Singapore had spared him the first part of the retreat, was looking decidedly the worse for wear as he worked with a company of Punjabis at wiring the road.

Yet if these fighting men were weary, so was General Percival, and he was worried, too. Does it strike you as odd that whatever iniative was planned by Malaya Command invariably turned out to contain a flaw which would cause it to fail? It was beginning to strike Percival as very odd indeed. At times he could see the flaw well in advance but even so … it always happened that he could do nothing about it. He could not find fault with General Heath, though it was true that Heath was 'Indian Army' and hence, in Percival's view, not a great deal could be expected of him. As a matter of fact, it could even be argued that Heath was being

miraculously successful in preserving his retreating 111 Indian Corps from being destroyed And so, who was to blame? He could not, in all fairness, blame himself or his staff for the flaw that kept appearing. Very often it was simply the lie of land that caused his plans to go adrift … or perhaps it was the result of that earlier bungling by poor old Brookers. Whatever the reason, the flaw kept on appearing. It was most peculiar. Or worse than peculiar.

On the night of 4 January, worn out by the constant strain and worried by the prospect of an important conference with General Heath and General Gordon Bennett at Segamat on the following day, Percival fell into a deep sleep. Almost immediately, it seemed, he plunged into a confusing dream about some interminable dinner-party at Government House. But it was not *now* that it was taking place, in the New Year of 1942, for there, opposite, was the decent, blunt, straightforward countenance of old General Dobbie, the GOC. So it must then be 1937 when he had been out here as GSO1 on Dobbie's staff. At the end of the table he could see the Governor's handsome, slightly supercilious face: behind the Governor again there was someone standing in the shadows speaking into his ear. Percival knew there was someone there because whoever it was had rested his hand on the back of the Governor's chair in a familiar sort of way while he was whispering. He could just make out that the hand emerged from the sleeve of a uniform, but belonging to which of the Services he could not say.

Suddenly, and with spirit, he challenged this man in the shadows. After a moment the hand on the Governor's chair was withdrawn. A period of confusion and darkness followed, of which he could make no sense. Presently he sat up, sweating and suffocating inside the mosquito net. The image of the Governor, gazing at him with a condescending smile, slowly faded. It was still dark.

Percival looked at his watch, took a swallow of water from the glass beside his bed and lay back again. It was very hot. The fan slogging away above him could make little impression on the air inside his mosquito net. He would have liked to tear away the net and sleep in fresh air again, but he could not possibly risk an insect bite that might lead to malaria or dengue fever, not at this stage. 'I'll never sleep like this, though,' he told himself. Yet, despite the heat, he fell asleep again almost immediately and this time he dreamed that he was back at Staff College and he was doing some exam or other on which his whole career in the Army would depend. Wait, he had remembered now what it was. He had to prevent the Japanese from seizing the Naval Base on Singapore Island and they had already got almost as far as Kuala Lumpur. He was no longer at Staff College. He was in Malaya and it was the real thing. He began to sweat and worry again in his sleep.

But towards dawn Percival received a welcome visit. The shades of Clausewitz and Metternich came to his bedside to offer their advice. Presently they were joined by the spirits of Liddell Hart and of Sir Edward Hamley, author of Hamley's *The Operations of War, Explained and Illustrated*. These gentlemen considered a number of solutions to the difficulties which faced him. Metternich recommended that everything should be wagered on a rapid strike north to disrupt the Japanese lines of communication, Hamley spoke vaguely of flanking movements (and also, less pertinently, of cavalry), Clausewitz wanted Percival to withdraw his troops intact to Singapore Island to conserve them until reinforcements could arrive from Europe and America. Ah, that was interesting! Percival listened eagerly to these ghostly advisers and found each more persuasive than the last. But presently their voices grew fainter and they fell to arguing among themselves. All too soon came the tread of the orderly's heavy boots in the corridor outside.

Conscious again, Percival decided, at his meeting in Segamat with General Heath and General Gordon Bennett, that although in most respects the narrowness of the Slim River position lent itself well to defence, the threat of amphibious landings further down the coast would make it untenable in the long run unless reinforcements could be brought up to cover the coastal area. The Slim River defile, however, provided the last chance of stopping the enemy short of Kuala Lumpur … or indeed, south of it for a considerable distance. For as you went south the knobbly spine of mountains sank back beneath the peninsula's fair skin, which itself became pleasantly wrinkled with roads. There would be little chance in such favourable terrain of stopping the Japanese in Malacca. And so, if not in Malacca, it would have to be in Johore … if not on Singapore Island itself. In the meantime, the Japanese must be denied the airfield at Kuantan on the east coast, at least until the reinforcements of troops and planes expected in mid-January had arrived. Moreover, if the defence of Johore was to be properly organized, the Japanese must be halted for a time and the capture of Kuala Lumpur postponed. Everything pointed therefore to the critical defensive stand being made at the Slim River. The Japanese must be stopped there or the defence of Johore would be hopeless. That was why the Punjabis and the Argylls had to keep on digging themselves in even after dark on the following nights. Everything would depend on them.

45

As the late afternoon shadows were beginning to lengthen over the Mayfair's increasingly neglected and overgrown compound, two figures could be seen making their way along the well-trodden path towards the Blacketts' house: one of these was easily recognizable as Matthew, normally dressed, looking somewhat pensive, but who was the other, this individual wearing what looked like a scarlet boiler-suit, a scarlet balaclava helmet from which horns protruded, and carrying a large toasting-fork? This, as it happened, was

only the Major who with great reluctance had put on the suit which he had been sent by Blackett and Webb Limited for the dress rehearsal of their jubilee parade. He was now regretting the decision because he felt much too hot: you cannot expect to wear a balaclava helmet and horns in the tropics without discomfort. Besides, he was afraid that he might be the only person who had decided to dress up, and he now regretted having yielded to Walter's insistence that he should personify Inflation. The Major swiped irritably with his toasting-fork at one of the giant thistles growing beside the tennis court and the air filled with drifting white down.

The Major, however, had a reason for wanting to keep in with Walter. Several of Blackett and Webb's vans had been set aside for conversion into floats for the jubilee parade and the Major, to whom it had been perfectly clear for some time that the parade would never take place, was anxious that his AFS unit should be able to call on them in an emergency to supplement what scanty transport was available: this amounted to the Lagonda, Mr Wu's Buick, a motor-cycle belonging to the estate manager and a couple of bicycles.

A site for the building of the floats had been chosen adjacent to the Blacketts' compound in a yard surrounded by a cluster of dilapidated godowns which at some time in the last century had been used as storage sheds for a nutmeg plantation but for the past many years had been disused, at least, until recently when Walter's excessive buying of rubber to circumvent the new American regulations had filled all Blackett and Webb's other godowns to overflowing and obliged these tumbledown buildings, hastily restored, to accommodate some of the surplus. Walter had originally bought the former nutmeg plantation, which still boasted pleasant groves of lofty, evergreen nutmeg trees, in order to cushion his own property from its acquisition by disagreeable neighbours. But now it seemed to him that he could hardly have made a better investment. Where better could he have found to prepare in secret the floats for Blackett and Webb's triumphant parade?

The Major had been waiting patiently over the past three weeks for the reality of Singapore's increasingly precarious situation to put paid to Walter's jubilee parade. At least, he had assumed, work on building the floats would have been abandoned. With a continuing shortage of labour at the docks and with the Forces trying desperately to recruit men to build defences and accommodation that should have been built years ago it was inconceivable that labour should be diverted to something as trivial as Walter's floats. Yet although the building of them had been considerably delayed he was astonished to find now that work was still continuing; moreover, twice as many men were working on them as before. The explanation was simple: the men in question, Asiatics normally employed as carpenters, painters or welders at the docks, very naturally preferred the comparative safety of this nutmeg grove to working on coastal defences, at the docks, or the Naval Base under the threat of air-raids.

In other respects, however, there were definite signs that reality was making substantial inroads into Walter's dream. The only Europeans who had decided to attend this dress rehearsal were Monty, even more bizarrely dressed than the Major, and a few of the younger executives of Blackett and Webb who had presumably found it impossible to refuse; none of the latter had seen fit to dress up for the occasion. Less than half of the Chinese who had been summoned to animate the dragons had turned up. Not more than three-quarters of a Chinese brass band was perched on some rusting machinery at one end of the yard, occasionally banging or blowing at their instruments but for the most part watching dubiously as Walter, looking impatient and out of sorts, shouted at his helpers and tried to marshal enough volunteers to get one of the dragons moving. As he saw Matthew and the Major arrive he broke off, however, and came over to them.

'It's good of you to come,' he said. 'I appreciate it. Most people haven't, though, and I doubt whether we're going to be able to do very much with what we have …' He paused gesturing vigorously. 'Not there, you ass! Over there with the others! How many times do I have to tell you?' He sighed with exasperation, stuck his hands in his pockets and surveyed the chaotic scene spread before him. He was perspiring freely, and looked squat, formidable and slightly demented. 'It's no use,' he muttered, more to himself than to the Major and Matthew, 'what can you do with such people?'

The Major cautiously lifted a finger to scratch one of his horns which was itching. He was a little surprised to find that he felt sorry for Walter. He said nothing, however. Together they set off to inspect the floats, Walter explaining that he *had* hoped to get the whole parade together and into motion and to take a couple of turns around the swimming pool and back here again to iron out any last minute difficulties. That was now out of the question unless the absentees presented themselves double quick. They passed two floats parked in the shade of a nutmeg tree: on one of them Joan sat, wearing a plumed Roman helmet and a flowing white garment of Grecian appearance which displayed her lovely arms and shoulders to advantage; in her left hand she held a trident, her right hand secured the Britannic shield. She was gazing impassively ahead and when Matthew murmured 'Hello' made no reply (perhaps she had not heard him). Kate sat on the other float with her arm around a gigantic cornucopia: she brightened up when she saw Matthew and waved her free hand.

Kate's cornucopia had a few minutes earlier been the cause of a furious row between Walter and Monty. From out of its gaping mouth there spilled an abundance of everything made of rubber: motor-tyres of all shapes and sizes, bicycle tyres, inner tubes, shoes and wellingtons, rubber gloves, sou'westers, batting gloves, rubber sheets and tiles, shock absorbers, rubber-tipped pencils, cushions, kneeling pads, balloons, elastic bands, belts, braces and a hundred and one other things, not all of them recognizable. To this magnificent array Monty, as a joke, had attempted to add a packet of contraceptives. As ill luck would have it, Walter had

noticed his son chuckling gleefully as he arranged something conspicuously on the very lip of the cornucopia. His display of anger, even to Monty who was accustomed to it, had been frightening. Walter was incensed, not simply that Monty should have done something that might have made the cornucopia look ridiculous, but that he should have paid so little heed to the modesty of his younger sister. Monty had retired, disgraced, and was at present slouching glumly in the shade of another tree.

'Why don't you get off your behind and do something to help,' Walter shouted at him roughly as he passed. Monty stirred uncomfortably but evidently could think of no way in which he could improve on what was being done already, for presently he sank back again. Monty, the Major noticed, like himself had been allotted a rôle in the counter-parade which was to accompany the paradé proper, harassing it symbolically to represent the pitfalls that a thriving business might have to face in its passage over the years; as a matter of fact, the Major was quite looking forward to tormenting plump and cheerful little Kate with his toasting-fork, though he could see no real reason why inflation should carry a toasting-fork at all. Monty's costume came no closer than the Major's to suggesting the part that he was to portray: it consisted of an old striped swimming-costume with shoulder straps, striped football socks rolled right up his hairy thighs and a fanged mask which bore a disturbing coincidental resemblance to General Percival: at the moment this mask and an inflated bladder tied to a stick lay on the ground beside him; the final and most frightening touch in Monty's costume were the awe-inspiring, curved talons which had been grafted on to a pair of batting-gloves for the occasion. Walter had alloted Monty the rôle of Crippling Overheads in the parade and had refused all his requests for a more heroic part.

The Major was now gazing with misgiving at one or two of the other floats which Walter, his spirits reviving a little, was showing him (Matthew had sloped off for a chat with Kate and perhaps was even hoping to make it up with Joan). Despite all the difficulties and postponements, Walter was saying, certain advances had been made in Blackett and Webb's preparations: it would be a great shame, and the most bitter of disappointments to him personally, if the jubilee should 'for one reason or another' now fail to take place. These advances, the Major had to agree, were considerable: four of the vans which had been set aside for the jubilee had already been crowned with the harnesses of wooden spars and metal brackets on which would be placed, when the time came, the floats which the committee had decided upon; other harnesses and floats were still under construction here and there, and in due course other vans would be temporarily commandeered to support them. Here was the towering dome-shaped head of the octopus which, instead of the more usual lion, had been selected to symbolize Singapore herself: this octopus, smiling genially, had been fitted out with amazingly lifelike rubber tentacles specially made for the occasion in Blackett and Webb's local workshops with the participation of local craftsmen 'of all races' (as Walter explained). The advantage of rubber for this purpose, he went on, was that it was flexible and the ends of tentacles which were twisted normally into rings could be pulled open to allow someone to be 'captured' in a friendly grip: in this way young women with banners proclaiming them to be Shanghai, Hong Kong, Batavia, Saigon and so forth could walk along beside the float and appear to writhe in the tentacles, which would fit round their necks, in 'a very naturalistic manner'. An elegant solution to the problem, as the Major must agree.

Next to the octopus came another float with eight more arms, this time human. These arms, immensely long, stretched forward over the cab of the van which was to carry them, and had been painted variously dark brown, light brown, yellow and white to represent the four races of Malaya stretching out side by side to reach for prosperity above massive signboards reading, in Tamil, Malay, Chinese and English: ALL IN IT TOGETHER.

'Wouldn't it be better if it read simply "All together" or "All working together"?' suggested the Major. 'It seems to me that there's something a bit odd about "all *in it* together".'

'Oh, I don't think so, no,' replied Walter vaguely. 'It seems all right to me … Not inside the bloody van, you idiot, *on top of it*!' he added in an indignant howl at an impassive Chinese carpenter who was trying to drag a large sign bearing the words 'Continuity in Prosperity' into the driving seat of one of the vans.

'Still no sign of the rest of the so-and-sos who said they'd come!' Walter inspected his watch, looking defenceless all of a sudden. 'Well, come on, we'll give them another few minutes and then if they haven't turned up we'll call it a day.'

They walked on. A pink-faced youth, one of Blackett and Webb's younger executives, hurried up with some problem for Walter. After a hasty conference Walter said: 'if you don't mind, Major, this young man will show you the rest. I'll be with you again in a few minutes.' He strode away, summoning an Indian secretary with a clipboard to accompany him. Once he was out of sight the prospective participants in the parade relaxed visibly.

The Major, with the pink-faced young man at his side, now found himself standing in front of Prosperity herself, depicted by sandwich boards as long as the van which was to carry them and twice as high. These boards had been skillfully painted to imitate Straits dollar bills, enormously magnified: on one side the blue one-dollar, on the other the red ten-dollar, and both with the oval portrait of the King which you would find on the currency itself, beautifully painted to show every detail of his wavy hair and high ceremonial collar, though perhaps with eyes more slanted than usual, for this, too, was the work of a Chinese artist. 'Blackett and Webb 1892-1942. Fifty Years of Prosperity for Workers of All Races.'

'I hope you approve, Major Archer,' said the young man politely. 'We in the Firm happen to think it's a

rather valuable contribution.'

'I must say,' said the Major dubiously, 'that I wonder whether this is quite the moment to go in for all this sort of thing.

But no! didn't the Major see that it was precisely now that such a jubilee parade was needed, now more than at any other moment in the history of the Colony?

They had moved on to yet another float in the form of a crown composed of vertical wooden laths painted silver to simulate metal and tipped with arrowheads. This float, which was entitled 'The Blackett and Webb Group of Companies', also carried the slogans 'Continuity in Prosperity' and 'All in it Together'. The Major paused, fascinated, for behind the bars of the crown, as if in a cage, were a number of rather sulky-looking young women with marcelled hair and bright red lipstick wearing glittering silver lamé dresses. Each of these women was evidently intended to represent one of Blackett and Webb's interests for although their dresses were identical they wore a variety of silk sashes proclaiming 'Shipping', 'Insurance', 'Import-Export', 'Rubber', 'Engineering', 'Pineapple Canning', 'Entrepôt' and a great many more. The Major, eyeing this float, was recalling uneasily his conversation with Matthew about how Blackett and Webb controlled the rubber companies under its management by means of incestuous investment, when the young women on the float spotted his companion; they appeared to recognize him for they crowded to the bars of the crown and began to shout abuse, including certain expressions which the Major was surprised to hear coming from such attractive young ladies. 'When you give us bloody-damn money?' they shrieked at him, among other things. 'We waiting here all bloody-damn afternoon!'

The young executive, however, blushing furiously, averted his gaze and hurried the Major along, explaining in an undertone that these young women had possibly been 'a bit of a mistake': they were a singing group called the Da Sousa Sisters temporarily stranded in Singapore for want of nightclub engagements. Although the terms of their employment in Blackett and Webb's jubilee parade had been carefully explained to them in advance, it had turned out that they had expected a certain amount of special treatment as 'professional artistes'. However, he went on, panting slightly, what he had been about to say was that the important thing was *continuity* in the Colony's prosperity. All races must realize that there was no earthly use in a long period of poverty followed by a quick and unreliable fortune, like a big win at roulette. That sort of thing got a country nowhere! What you wanted was a slow and steady enrichment over the years … the very thing, as it happened, that firms like Blackett and Webb had been supplying for the past fifty years or more. While he was enlarging excitedly on this aspect of prosperity, using expressions like 'infrastructure' and 'economic spread' which, however, only served to numb the Major's brain, an air-raid siren sounded. Some moments of chaos followed. Men dashed here and there. Steel helmets were clapped on. Some people peered apprehensively at the sky, others dived for shelter. The Da Sousa Sisters set up a terrible shrieking to be let out of the crown in which they were imprisoned. 'I suppose we'll have to let them out,' muttered the young executive, 'but I don't know how we'll ever get them back.' But already Monty was unfastening the door of their cage in an effort to ingratiate himself, though not before 'Import-Export' had taken off one of her shoes to join 'Wireless and Electrical' in hammering on the bars. The Major's companion dragged him hurriedly towards a makeshift shelter, more, it seemed, for protection from the Da Sousa Sisters who were now running loose than from possible bombs.

In due course the Major found himself crouching down in a sort of igloo made of rubber bales which was the nearest approach that could be devised to an air-raid shelter; while he crouched there democratically with 'workers of all races' he noticed that his companion had clapped on a steel helmet. The Major regretted that he had not brought his own helmet: clearly it could not have been expected to fit over his horns. Never mind, it was too late to do anything about it now! Nevertheless, while the young executive began to explain that by 'infrastructure' he meant such things as roads, railways and other services which, though they do not produce wealth *themselves*, are crucial to its production in the long run, not least by enticing investment from overseas, the Major continued to finger his horns uncertainly, wishing that he had not been such a bally fool. He had not brought his gas-mask either.

But, the young man went on, you could not build roads and railways on a 'here today, gone tomorrow' basis … for such investments you need a steady volume of trade over a number of years! That was the substance of the magic phrase 'continuity in prosperity' which, as the Major had no doubt noticed, was painted everywhere in Chinese as well as English characters.

Would it not have been better, though, replied the Major, if both vans and workers of all races had been employed on the more urgent tasks of, say, preventing Singapore from burning to the ground, repairing the bomb damage or unloading the ships which lay in the docks with cargoes of urgently needed ammunition and supplies?

After all, it was absurd that soldiers who were needed to man the defences should have to unload these ships because the labour force had decamped to build Blackett and Webb's floats. But even as the Major spoke there came the crump of exploding bombs from the direction of Keppel Harbour and he was obliged to admit that the labour force, ill-paid as it was, and without adequate air-raid shelters, would most likely have decamped anyway, and one could hardly blame them. At length, the 'all clear' sounded and the Major crawled stiffly out of the rubber igloo and got to his feet. It was time he was getting back to the Mayfair in case his services should be needed.

But there was still something that the young man from Blackett and Webb wanted to show him before he went and the Major, protesting weakly, allowed himself to be diverted towards one or two floats which had been designed to portray the social benefits which had attended these fifty years of successful commerce. Here was a papier mâché teacher beside a gigantic blackboard on which was written in the usual languages 'All in it together' and these small grey lumps which had still to be painted severally in dark brown, light brown, yellow and …

'Yes, of course, "children of all races",' said the Major who was getting the hang of it by now.

'And this figure on a horse which is meant to be a sort of Chinese Saint George is using his lance to kill … no, not a dragon, the Chinese are rather fond of dragons … but a hookworm, very much magnified, of course. But now, and this is what I really wanted you to see, we come to the most ambitious float of all from a technical point of view … though it doesn't look much, I agree, until you see it working. Yes, it represents a symbolical rubber tree … It had to be symbolical because real rubber trees look so uninteresting … producing wealth for all races. If you look closely, Major, you'll see that a hole representing the cut made by the tapper's knife has been made in the bark. Now when I pull this switch here liquid gold pours out into this basin …'

'Liquid gold?'

'Well, actually, its just coloured water … now what's the matter. Oh, I see, the pump's not plugged in. Here we go!' He pulled the switch and the tree began to spurt noisily into the basin.

'It looks as if it's … well …' said the Major.

'Yes, I'm afraid it does rather. But it was the best we could do. At first we tried a little conveyor belt inside the trunk which kept spilling coins through the opening in the bark and that looked fine, but the blighters kept pinching the coins. Still, it wasn't a bad idea.' He sighed and looked momentarily discouraged. 'Anyway, don't you agree that once we get this jubilee parade on the road it should make it clear to everyone what they will have to lose by exchanging us for the Japanese?'

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There was an area of unusually dense jungle in that part of the Slim River region where General Percival had decided that a stand must be made if southern Malaya were to be given the time to prepare its defences: it lay a little to the north of the village and rubber plantation at Trolak where, incidently, one branch of the river flowed under a bridge. To cross this stretch of dense jungle both the trunk road and the railway were obliged to squeeze together and run side by side through a narrow defile which resembled the unusually long neck of a bottle. If the Japanese tanks were to continue their southward advance they would have no alternative but to come through this narrow defile. But just beyond its long neck the bottle opened out into the wider chamber (more like a decanter than a bottle) of the Klapa Bali rubber estate and of Trolak village. If the Japanese tanks once managed to pass through that long neck and get loose among the rubber trees, well … then there would be no stopping them. The only chance then, perhaps, might be to delay them by demolishing the bridge at Trolak and the Slim River Bridge some five miles down the road. And so, demolition charges had been set against these bridges, just in case.

The Brigadier in command of the 12th Brigade, which had been given the task of defending the defile, had established his Brigade HQ some distance into the Klapa Bali estate on the western side of the road. In the rubber on the other side of the road was the 2nd Battalion of his own regiment, the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders, known since Balaclava as 'The Thin Red Line'; the presence of the Argylls was naturally a source of comfort to the Brigadier for unlike many of the other troops at his disposal, who were ill-trained and inexperienced, they had proved an effective fighting force against the Japanese, thanks largely to his own efforts in training them for jungle warfare before the campaign began. The Brigadier was a tall man with a long, lean, intelligent face which wore, as a rule, a somewhat grim and determined expression. A luxuriant moustache flourished on his upper lip, as surprising on those craggy features as a clump of wild flowers lodged on a rock face. His arms were thin, his body was thin, his knees under his shorts were thin, all of him was thin. It was surprising then that, despite this lack of manifest strength, he should radiate such purpose and such confidence. Even now, exhausted though he was by three weeks of retreating, digging in, fighting, and again retreating, invariably under appalling conditions, his confidence appeared undiminished.

Nevertheless, as darkness now began to fall on 6 January and he awaited developments, the Brigadier was seriously concerned. Because of the eerie quietness which had prevailed all day he had dared to hope that the Japanese might have been halted by the severe blow they had received in an ambush sprung by the Argylls on the railway the previous day. General Paris, on the other hand, whom he had contacted by telephone, had gloomily postulated a wide flanking movement through the dense jungle which would suddenly develop into an attack in the rear. It had happened before.

The Brigadier had pondered the problems of fighting in the jungle and had noticed that instead of a wary advance on a broad front the Japanese preferred a swift and violent attack down the narrow corridor of the road itself to a considerable depth. For whoever had control of the road, as the Brigadier had already realized, in a situation where maps and wireless were scarce, had control of the only practical means of communication. In dense jungle or in a trackless ocean of identical rubber trees it was hard, or impossible, to

calculate your exact position; without an accurate idea of where you were it was out of the question to organize an effective manoeuvre. If you had the road, on the other hand, you had everything.

The Brigadier, therefore, was expecting the Japanese to attack straight down the road: given the position they could, in any case, do little else; only if this assault were stopped could they be expected to leave the road and attempt to encircle its defenders. He had, therefore, disposed his 12th Brigade in depth along the road and railway where they ran together for some distance, with two battalions in the defile: one, the Hyderabads, in a forward position to take the first assault and then fall back; the other, the Punjabis, to deal with the main attack. He was counting on the Japanese being stopped at this point and finding themselves committed to encircling through the jungle. To deal with this eventuality, at the southern end of the defile four companies of the Argylls were positioned on either side of the road to meet flanking attacks at the point where the Japanese would emerge from the jungle into the rubber.

But what made the Brigadier's long face look even sterner than usual as he awaited developments was the knowledge of the weakened state the brigade was in. Even his own Argylls were reaching the end of their physical resources: what they needed, and the Indian battalions even more so, was just a little time to recover … even a few hours would make a difference. But throughout the campaign the Japanese had, time and again, followed up their attacks more quickly than expected. The Brigadier was hardly surprised in consequence when Captain Sinclair presently informed him that Chinese refugees filtering through the British positions ahead of the advancing Japanese had brought news of a large column of tanks they had seen moving up the trunk road.

'They say their engineers have been suh … suh … suh … warming like ants at every demolished bridge for miles back, sir,' stammered Sinclair excitedly. He was surprised and deeply impressed that the Brigadier should remain his imperturbable self at this news of approaching tanks. *He* knew, and the Brigadier knew, just how much could be hoped for from the anti-tank defences in the defile … In the four days that had elapsed since the decision had been taken to make a stand here, work on the defences had continued whenever the constant Japanese air-raids permitted. Weapons pits had been dug and wire had been strung by Chinese and Indian coolies supervised by engineers sent forward by 11th Division; no sooner had the troops themselves arrived, tired though they were by this latest withdrawal, than they, too, had been obliged to join in the work on the defences. But the only defences that could be found that might, at a pinch, stop tanks were a few concrete blocks and a couple of dozen anti-tank mines, both of which had been disposed in the defile. All well and good. Sinclair knew, however (he was a much keener soldier than he had been a diplomat), that tanks are distinctly solid objects: the only point in stopping them with your concrete blocks, which you won't do for long, in any case, with these improvised methods, is to allow your anti-tank guns to get in a good shot at them while motionless. Unfortunately, the slender obstacles which the 12th Brigade had been able to erect in the defile were covered by a mere three anti-tank guns manned, into the bargain, by gunners who had, alas, never been trained to cope with tanks at all, even in daylight, let alone tanks most likely firing tracer at close range in pitch darkness. That should be enough to make even a seasoned gunner's hair stand on end, never mind a raw Indian recruit.

Well then, what else was there to stop the Japs? A railway bridge, forward, had been blown up (the Japanese had tanks with wheels that would run on the rails, it was thought). The Argylls, in common with the rest of the British forces in Malaya, had no tanks of their own, only armoured cars and bren-gun carriers; although these might come in handy on the estate roads to cope with a flanking movement by the Jap infantry into the rubber they were quite useless, of course, against tanks. Most serious of all, the British anti-tank rifles would not penetrate the armour of the Japanese medium tanks. And so what could be done? If the tanks once got through the defile there was only the bridge at Trolak and the Slim River Bridge, both prepared for demolition, which lay between the tanks and the open road to Singapore. And now, into the bargain, it seemed that the Japanese attack would come twenty-four hours sooner than expected.

If the Brigadier received this news of an impending attack from young Sinclair without making a fuss, it was partly because it was his business to be imperturbable, partly because he knew that one can never predict quite how things will turn out: battles cannot be decided on paper by subtracting the armour of one side from the armour of the other and giving the victory to the side which has the surplus. There was a probability, certainly, that the tanks would have the advantage … but so much depends on the quality of the men and on what is going on in their minds. True, the Indian battalions were in very poor shape and the Argylls were not much better. But a quick success or two and who could tell? Thank heaven, anyway, for the few dozen reinforcements who had just arrived from Singapore on this dark, rain-lashed night, under Captain Hamish Ross, for they included some of the best men in the battalion. The few words he had had with Ross had cheered him.

'We had a wee spot o' bother, sir, at Tyersall Park,' Ross had said, eyeing the Brigadier slyly. 'I suppose ye might call it a mutiny.'

'A mutiny, man? Ye'll no expect me to believe that, Hamish Ross!'

And so Captain Ross had explained. When his party of reinforcements had paraded at the Tyersall camp in Singapore a number of Argylls on staff duty whom Malaya Command had specifically ordered him to leave behind had paraded too, demanding to return to the regiment to join in the scrap.

'Aye, now that's more like it,' nodded the Brigadier and, though his expression was no less forbidding,

Hamish Ross could tell by the glint in his eye that he was pleased. These new arrivals would help put heart into the other men, given enough time for them to settle in.

Outside, the rain had slackened now. Making his way through the rubber trees back to the road to find out whether anything more had been gleaned from Chinese refugees, Sinclair paused, gripped by the sense of unreality which comes from excitement and lack of sleep. In the course of the afternoon he had gone forward with the Brigadier to inspect the progress that the Hyderabads and the Punjabis were making with their defences and there he had met Charlie Tyrrell, Mrs Blackett's brother. He did not know Charlie very well. In Singapore they had not met more than once or twice at the Blacketts' house and even then had scarcely exchanged more than a few words. But seeing each other now in these unusual, even desperate circumstances, they had immediately begun to talk as if they were old friends. Charlie had come back with him for an hour to the Argylls' area in the rubber.

Sinclair had been shocked to see the state that Charlie was in. His handsome face was hollow-cheeked with fatigue, dirty and inflamed with insect bites; even his khaki was in tatters. But it was not so much Charlie's physical appearance that had given Sinclair a shock, for in the middle of a jungle campaign one does not expect to see a soldier looking as if he has just turned out on parade: it was the feverish look in his eyes and the obsessive, fatalistic way in which he talked … almost as if he were talking to himself, as if Sinclair had not been there at all. Charlie talked incessantly about his men: he had never seen them so apathetic and dejected! They were at the end of their tether, that much was clear! 'How can you blame them?' he had demanded without waiting for a reply. 'Most of them are barely trained recruits.'

Sinclair had nodded sympathetically. Unlike the Argylls down the road the Punjabis did not possess that extra strength for living and fighting in the jungle which comes from training in atrocious conditions, from discipline, from regimental traditions which, combining all together, temper each individual and form what Sinclair thought of as a collective willpower, imperious and inflexible (yet even some of his own Argylls were close to cracking).

He had watched his men for the past two days, Charlie went on, and it was clear that their only thought (though these were the bravest of men!) was to huddle in their slit trenches, the nearest approach to security they could find. But who could blame them? In the course of their long retreat through northern and central Malaya the battalion had lost two hundred and fifty men, of whom many had been killed. From dawn the day before yesterday, there had been a steady stream of Jap bombers and fighters blasting away at the edges of the jungle on both sides of the defile where, though hidden, they knew the British forces to be. These planes had robbed the Punjabis of any chance they might have had of resting before the next attack; they had also caused a further trickle of casualties. And yet, somehow, even that was not the worst of it … It was …

They were standing a little way off the road in the shade. Charlie was leaning his back against the trunk of a rubber tree. As he spoke he kept wearily slapping his sweating face with his hand as if to drive off insects but mechanically, with resignation (besides, Sinclair could see no insects around Charlie's face) … Abruptly Sinclair was afraid that the Brigadier might come by and see Charlie in this state. He felt that that could not be allowed to happen, he could not quite say why, except that you only had to glance at the way Charlie was leaning against the rubber tree, talking and slapping himself, his gaunt and desperate face dappled by sunlight and shadow filtering through the leaves, to know that he had very nearly reached the point where he simply *would not care* any longer!

But still Charlie was trying to explain himself to Sinclair, with an almost pathetic determination that he should understand … He was trying to say that, however bad it might be when the Jap Zero was roaring along the road machine-gunning the fringes of the jungle, it was no better when the plane had dipped its wing and swung away over the tree tops. Because within a few seconds an eerie silence had fallen, blanketing even the sound of the departing plane. 'When you've been in this bloody place a bit longer, Sinclair,' he said, grinning now as if there was something amusing about what he was saying, but at the same time scratching his ribs viciously through his tattered shirt, 'you'll understand exactly what I mean.'

'Well, I've been trying to get up here for the past three weeks,' said Sinclair defensively, for it was true that it was only four days since he had left Singapore, 'but I think I know what you mean.'

There was something about this silence, went on Charlie, ignoring him: it gave the sound of your voice a distant, unreal quality. Even quite sharp sounds, like the dropping of a mess tin on the metalled road, would be blotted up immediately by the dense green walls on either side. The sound did not seem to *go* anywhere, that was it. There was no resonance. It gave you a baffling sensation, like speaking into a dead telephone. Only at night did you begin to hear sounds again. But so disturbing were the night sounds that the silence was almost better. Another thing, action here seemed to have no more resonance than sounds. During the daytime when you stopped moving, everything stopped, as if you were on the floor of a dead ocean. Everything had to come from *you*, that was what was so intolerable. His men felt the same way, he could tell by watching them. For men already exhausted this need to initiate all movement from their own resources was unendurable.

The two men were silent for a few moments. Charlie had evidently come to the end of what he had wanted to say. Although he still leaned dejectedly against the tree, he had stopped slapping himself and appeared calmer. 'Sorry to go on like that about it,' he said presently. 'It's the same for everyone, of course. Besides, it's not much better for you blokes here in the rubber.' It was true, Sinclair reflected, that even at the best of times there was something unnerving about a rubber plantation; wherever you stood you found yourself at the

centre of a bewildering maze of identical trees which stretched out geometrically in every direction as far as the eye could see. But in Malaya the eye, as a rule, could not see very far; you seldom found a place from where you could get a prospect *over* the jungle or rubber which covered the country like a green lid on a saucepan.

'D'you know Rilke's poem about the panther?' asked Charlie suddenly, smiling.

Sein Blick ist vom Vorübergehen der Stäbe
So müd geworden … dass er nichts mehr hält …

'Roughly translated it means: "His gaze from looking through the bars has grown so tired he can't take in anything more."

Ihm ist, als ob es tausend Stäbe gäbe
Und hinter tausend Stäben keine Welt.

"It seems to him as if there are a thousand bars and behind the thousand bars, no world." That's what I feel about all these bloody rubber trees.'

Sinclair thought of this again as, now in darkness, he strode on through the dripping ranks of trees, trying to shake off the premonition that if the Japanese attacked tonight it would be the end of the line for the Punjabis, no matter how strong the position they occupied in the defile.

As the night advanced the rain stopped and the moon began to appear, fitfully at first and then more frequently, between the clouds. From the jungle a dreadful odour of rotting vegetation crept out over the waiting Punjabis and hung there in the humid atmosphere. Now, more brilliant than ever, the moon hung like a great white lamp over the two black walls of jungle, shining so brightly that if you moved out of the covering foliage you could see your shadow clearly printed on the surface of the road. Behind them, a little way along the road, the Argylls guarding the exits from the defile into the rubber listened, skin crawling, to the steady churning of the jungle.

Charlie looked at the luminous green face of his wrist watch: it was midnight. From close at hand there came the metallic sound of some insect he had never been able to identify … it resembled the winding-up of a clockwork toy. He was dreamily contemplating this sound and at the same time vowing to keep his eyes open when, like a paralysing blow from the darkness, there came at last the sound for which he had been listening for so long, the first thud of guns from the Hyderabads' position up the road. The shelling continued. For a while nothing else happened. One, two, three hours passed. He began to nod off again. Suddenly, he woke. The noise of gunfire had ceased. The Japanese were beginning their attack.

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Not far away from where Charlie waited with the Punjabis, a small, bespectacled figure in battledress sat in the back of a lorry gripping his knees tensely, his rifle locked between them. This was none other than Private Kikuchi and as he sat there in complete darkness he was doing his best to concentrate his thoughts on the heroic example of his uncle, Bugler Kikuchi, who had sounded his bugle with his dying breath. Private Kikuchi knew that in a few minutes, at a sign from his commander, Lieutenant Matsushita, he would have to hurl himself forward with his bayonet at the ready 'like a blind man unafraid of snakes', as Matsushita put it. Would he be able to follow Uncle Kikuchi's immaculate example? Huddled beside him in the lorry as it crept forward without lights he sensed, but could not see, his comrades of the Ando Regiment. Perhaps they too, were wondering what the hours before dawn would bring? Would they even live to see the daylight again? Perhaps they were hoping, if possible, to die gloriously fighting for the Emperor. Certainly, Lieutenant Matsushita would be. He was an officer with strangely burning eyes who had already served in the Imperial Army, mopping up bandits in Manchuria.

Kikuchi was astonished and awed by Lieutenant Matsushita. Every time he met those burning eyes it was as if he received an electric shock. The intensity of feeling in Matsushita, his utter devotion to the Emperor and to his country, had come as a revelation even to Kikuchi who, one might have thought, had little to learn about Japanese National Spirit with such an uncle. Yet there was something that Kikuchi found rather frightening about him at the same time … Sometimes it almost seemed as if he wanted to get not only himself but everyone else killed, too. He would dash forward sometimes with bullets falling about him like a spring shower while he might easily have advanced in relative security by some other route.

To make matters worse (or better, depending how you looked at it) he had taken a particular liking to Kikuchi, either because of his glorious uncle or because he sensed Kikuchi's fascination with him. On one occasion he had taken Kikuchi aside and shown him some of the medals he had been awarded and which he carried everywhere with him in a little waterproof pouch, even on the most desperate sorties into the jungle. He had allowed Kikuchi to gaze at his Order of the Rising Sun, Fourth Class, at his Decoration of Manchuria, Fourth and Fifth Classes, at his Campaign Medal of the Chinese Incident, at his Campaign Medal of the Manchurian Incident and at several others, including an Order of the Golden Kite, Fifth Class. 'One day,

Kikuchi, you too will have medals like these,' he had said, his eyes fastened on Kikuchi's and gripping them tightly as in two glowing chopsticks so that he could not turn away. 'Or you will be dead,' he added in a somewhat chilling manner, as an afterthought.

It was not that Kikuchi minded exactly dying for his Emperor if he had to; after all, like his comrades he had left some hair and fingernail clippings behind in Japan for funerary purposes in case the rest of his body did not return. He was not a Kikuchi for nothing! And yet, once or twice, observing Matsushita and his bosom companion, Lieutenant Nakamura, with whom he had graduated from the Military Academy, the thought had crossed Kikuchi's mind (indeed, it had had to be frogmarched across his mind under heavy guard and swiftly, like a deserter who must not be allowed to contaminate his fellows) that all things in human affairs, even battlefield glory, can be taken a tiny bit too far. Could it be that the High Command thought so, too? Well, no, that was unlikely. Yet despite their heroism neither Matsushita nor Nakamura had as yet risen very far in the Army. They were both still young, of course, but perhaps something else lay behind their lack of promotion … Kikuchi had heard a vague rumour that they might have been involved in an attempt to revive the November Affair at the Military Academy with a new revolt of ultra-patriotic cadets … or perhaps it was that they had led an assault on brother officers they suspected of aping European manners, something of the sort … Never mind, whatever the truth of the matter it was an honour, Kikuchi assured himself, gripping his knees more tightly than ever to take his mind off his churning stomach (perhaps he should have swallowed a couple of Jintan pills?), to serve under such fearless and patriotic officers. Both of them, as it happened, were nearby at this very moment: Matsushita was only a matter of inches away in the swaying darkness: Kikuchi could not see him but he pictured him sitting in his habitual pose, palms of both hands resting on the tasselled hilt of his sabre, his expression merciless.

As for Nakamura, he was leading the medium tanks and so, you might have thought, could not possibly be anywhere near this lorry full of infantry. Nevertheless, Nakamura was only a few yards in front. What had happened was that Matsushita, reckless as ever, had insisted that a platoon of picked infantry, under his personal leadership, should come next to Nakamura's leading tank in the assault column now moving down the road towards the British positions. He had wasted no time in picking Kikuchi to ride with him in his first lorry sandwiched between the two leading tanks; more troops of the Ando Detachment came in a position of somewhat greater security further down the armoured column. Kikuchi, naturally, was deeply conscious of the honour that had been done him. All the same, the leading vehicles in the column would certainly bear the brunt of the enemy fire. This would be bad enough for the tanks with their armour; what would it be like for a vulnerable lorry-load of infantry? Still, one must act heroically and hope for the best.

The tanks and lorries continued to creep forward head to tail, without lights. It was very quiet, as if all the men in the lorry, were holding their breath; Kikuchi listened to the steady rattling of the tank tracks on the road's surface but even this sound seemed barely audible, soaked up instantly by the dark mass of jungle on each side. How much longer would this go on for? He was weary and wanted to sleep. He was also hungry. How they had been driven! It seemed to him that this campaign, though it had lasted only three weeks, had been going on for ever. He sometimes found it hard to believe that he had ever known another kind of life … on and on they had trudged, seldom eating anything but dry bread and salt, not even pausing to consume the munificent food supplies left by the British as they retreated.

And what terrible endurance the High Command demanded of them! In Kikuchi's mind one ordeal had begun to blur and blend into another and only now and then did some particular occasion stand out clearly in his mind: he remembered advancing through the jungle towards the bridge at Kuala Kangsar with nothing to eat but what fruit they could find (yes, he had remembered not to eat beautifully shaped or coloured fruit), and an occasional stew of snake-meat (and yes, he had dutifully eaten the snake's raw liver according to instructions whenever the opportunity presented itself), prepared from the dismal creatures that squeezed in and out of the undergrowth beneath their feet. He remembered a fierce attack by Scotsmen north of the Perak River; for a while they had been halted there unable to communicate with their headquarters. But then a light aeroplane had appeared over the jungle and had dropped them a communication tube. It was a message from Mr Staff Officer Okada. Matsushita had told Kikuchi what it contained … 'Esteemed detachment, deep gratitude for several days' heroic fighting.' How pleased Matsushita had been for this praise from Mr Staff Officer Okada. He had been even more pleased when he had read on, for the message had ordered a raid on the southern bank of the Perak River. The bridge must be captured before it was demolished by the retreating British. How Matsushita's eyes had glistened at this desperate proposal!

Matsushita had grown thin as they made their way through the jungle, though none was more adept at killing snakes and swallowing their livers than he, gulping them one after another like oysters and leaving their disembowelled remains to be sucked and gnawed by his men as best they could for cooking-fires must not be lit lest the smoke give away their position. As he grew thinner, Matsushita's eyes grew larger and burned more fiercely than ever. Now he would be part of the glorious capture of the Perak River Bridge! And he had whipped his men forward to reach it and snip those glistening wires before the British engineers had time to press down the plunger. It would be done! For the Emperor!

Matsushita had asked for volunteers for this rash assignment. The men had all volunteered, of course. Even if any of them had not felt like doing so it would never have done to let Lieutenant Matsushita get it into his head that you were a coward … 'Well then, I must pick the men for this patrol myself,' he had said, his eyes

piercing each man in turn. And he had done so, while the troops waited in silence to hear their fate. Presently Kikuchi heard his name spoken.

At about midnight on 22 December while they had been camped some distance from the Perak River Bridge in a jungle of wild rubber, a tremendous boom had reverberated from the south. So astonishing was this noise that for several moments afterwards all the night-sounds of the jungle ceased, a dreadful silence prevailed: even small insects hesitated before eating each other and snakes paused as they squirmed in and out of their slimy homes. Kikuchi and his comrades had gazed at each other in consternation: this noise could only have come from one source. The British had demolished the bridge which they had been hoping to capture intact. White with shock at this lost opportunity Matsushita nevertheless had insisted on examining his maps to see whether the map reference of the bridge tallied with the direction from which the sound had appeared to come. It did. Matsushita uttered a groan and bowed his head to the earth. Later, he took Kikuchi aside and said in a low voice: 'Thoughts of self-condemnation overwhelm my heart, Kikuchi. Our lives will have to compensate for our error.' Kikuchi had nodded soothingly, though it had occurred to him that there seemed to be no particular reason why troops who had merely obeyed orders should have to take a share in the Lieutenant's error.

In front of them now Nakamura's tank had come to rest, bringing the column behind it to a halt. A whispered consultation was taking place: it was thought that they must now be very near the first position defended by the British. Matsushita had slipped off the tail of the lorry like a panther, invisible in the darkness. Kikuchi stood up carefully and managed to get a glimpse back down the road. Behind them stretched a column of some two dozen twenty-ton tanks, the moonlight glinting on their turrets; infantry lorries were interspersed with the more distant tanks. He knew that a detachment of lighter 'whippet' tanks came behind the medium tanks but he could not see them for a bend in the road.

Kikuchi sank back, a little reassured by this impressive sight. Each of the medium tanks, he knew, carried a four-pounder anti-tank gun and two heavy .303 machine-guns. But, in addition, a mortar had been fitted to each tank; although it was fixed so that it could only cover one side of the road, the tanks had been arranged so that the mortars alternated, now on one side, now on the other. There would certainly be a heavy enough fire from the tanks. Perhaps he might have a chance, after all. But even if he survived this battle there would still be another battle afterwards and another after that. How many weeks or months would this nightmarish life continue? He no longer had any idea whereabouts on the Malayan peninsula they were, or even what date it might be. The New Year had begun, that was all he knew for certain.

And what a New Year it had been; Matsushita had insisted on leading the unit on a wide detour through dense jungle and swamp to the west of the road to strike behind the position fortified by the British at Kampar. And so, while in Tokyo hundreds of miles away his family and friends had been exchanging greetings and celebrating with dishes of *soba*, Kikuchi and his comrades had been plunging through terrifying swamps, often sinking up to the chest in stinking slime which threatened to swallow them up and covered them with leeches fattening visibly on their tender flesh. Instead of listening to the temple bells on New Year's Eve as they rang out their message: 'All is vanity and unreality in this world!' and having a good time, Kikuchi had had to drag himself after Matsushita, his flesh lacerated by thorny vines, hair standing on end as poisonous snakes reared to right and left. And with nothing to chew but dry, uncooked rice and an occasional piece of snake dropped by Matsushita when he had gulped its liver in accordance with the pamphlet 'Read This Alone and the War Can Be Won'. As a matter of fact, it had been in the course of this particular ordeal that Kikuchi had first begun to wonder whether Matsushita was altogether sane. For, although he had always had a tendency to ramble on about Kikuchi's uncle, the legendary Bugler, he had now taken to making from time to time a slighting remark about him, hinting that in a contest of bravery and devotion to duty he, Matsushita, would by no means have come off second best to Uncle Kikuchi … and even going so far as to suggest that, although to blow a bugle with one's dying breath was all very fine in its way, if you were dying anyway you might just as well blow a bugle with it as do anything else. And, as if this were not sufficiently dismaying, there was worse. For Matsushita, as he plunged relentlessly on through swamp and jungle, hacking vigorously with his tasselled sabre, eyes burning, would occasionally pause and chant half aloud, half to himself, a weird song in a language which Kikuchi had never heard before. Often Matsushita would press on so swiftly that he would leave his men behind and they would find him waiting impatiently for them when at last they caught up. One day Kikuchi, hastening after his commander who as usual had got far ahead of the rest of the squad, had come upon him unexpectedly in a sort of clearing. Matsushita had thrown off his uniform for some reason and was standing there stark naked except for the bulging leeches which covered him from head to foot. Moreover, he was surrounded by a little circle of poisonous snakes which had reared up around him as if to listen as he sang to them, conducting himself with his sabre. Kikuchi tried to make out the strange words …

… Hanc sententiam dicamus …
Floreat Sand … ha … haa … liaaaaah!

As this weird and chilling incantation came to an end, Matsushita took the sabre and with a swift, clean swipe beheaded one snake after another. Then he swiftly gathered up the writhing bodies by the tails, stood there for a moment with a fistful of lashing bodies spraying blood over his thighs as if deep in thought, and finally

went to sit against the bole of a tree, prising them open one after another with two stubby fingers to search out the liver and pop it in his mouth. An enormous leech, Kikuchi could not help noticing, had battened on the Lieutenant's private parts. Kikuchi from a screen of fronds gazed in dismay at his leader, wondering what to do. But what was there to do, except report for duty as if nothing had happened?

However, as Kikuchi approached, Matsushita addressed him quite rationally and even, once the rest of the unit had arrived, delivered a short, invigorating lecture on Japanese National Spirit, enlarging on the virtues that this Spirit would bring to the oppressed races of Eastern Asia once the decadent Europeans had been thrust aside by the Imperial Army. While he spoke the members of his unit stood 'at ease' in an exhausted row, eyeing the leech which adhered to the Lieutenant's private parts and wondering whether they should bring it to his attention.

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The column had again halted. On a whispered order the infantry stumbled out of the lorries and dispersed to the sides of the road. How stiff were Kikuchi's limbs from the hours he had spent sitting on his heels in the back of the lorry! Since that dreadful ordeal in the jungle and the subsequent capture of Kampar fortress he had been obliged to travel fifty miles or more without transport. The Okabe Regiment, which had made the frontal assault on Kampar, had suffered losses and so the Ando Regiment (and Kikuchi) had had to take up the pursuit again. Since the retreating enemy had taken care to demolish the bridges behind them Kikuchi and his comrades had found themselves travelling on bicycles. This had not seemed too unpleasant at first (anything would have seemed better than wading up to your armpits through leech-filled swamps) but in no time Kikuchi was exhausted; whenever they came to a stream or a river it had to be waded and this entailed carrying his bicycle and equipment on his shoulders. Presently too, his tyres had punctured in the heat like those of his comrades: they had been obliged to rattle along on the rims (this sound, like a company of tanks approaching in the distance, sowed alarm among the retreating British). But so rapidly was the 15th Engineer Regiment repairing the bridges behind them that in due course the Ando Regiment had once more been overtaken by the heavy vehicle, artillery and tank units. Now here they all were, ready to attack by moonlight! Kikuchi's bayonet caught a glint of the moon as he waited, his heart pounding, and he thought: 'How beautiful!'

But he hardly had time to consider this thought before the night erupted into a volcano spitting fire and projectiles. The tank cannons flashed and roared, tracer poured in fiery streams into the darkness and Kikuchi found himself charging forward. A moment earlier it had seemed that he could scarcely hobble, so stiff were his limbs … but now he found himself running like a hare, with mouth open and lips curled back to emit a terrifying scream which, however, he himself could not hear at all, such was the noise of gunfire. Ahead of him galloped Matsushita, sword in one hand, revolver in the other. A grenade flashed in front of him but the Lieutenant had thrown himself into the ditch beside the road which lay in the shadow of the jungle, or fallen into it, more likely. Kikuchi had reached the comparative safety of this ditch a moment earlier and now crept along it towards Matsushita. Ahead, rolls of wire and a few concrete blocks had been set up across the road. Already, as they watched, the leading tank, still raking the British position with tracer, had reached the first of these pitiful obstacles, had crushed and snapped the barbed wire and brushed aside the concrete blocks and earthworks as easily as if they had been matchboxes. But this was Nakamura's tank. Kikuchi heard Matsushita hiss respectfully between his teeth as he watched it.

Though the British had been driven back to the fringes of the jungle a steady drizzle of rifle fire punctuated by grenades still poured out of the darkness. Only a madman would consider showing himself on the road itself under such a fire, but the next moment Matsushita had leapt out of the ditch and was signalling to his men to follow the tank down the channel it had battered into the British defences The column must drive on deep into the British lines and seize the bridges before they could be demolished. Nakamura must not get all the glory for his tank company!

Kikuchi, hastening after the Lieutenant, stumbled over a dead Hyderabadi, and in doing so grazed the palms of his hands on the road surface. Picking up his rifle again he hastened on over the flattened wire. Nakamura's tank had turned aside to blaze away at a fortified position in the jungle from which, in the blackness, a machine-gun was still dribbling fire, striking sparks off the tank's armoured turret. Meanwhile, more tanks had surged past Nakamura's, motors roaring, down the road into the haven of peace and darkness on the other side of the road-block.

At this moment Kikuchi became aware that the infantry lorry had followed him and was gunning its motor at his back as it negotiated the ruined and abandoned British defences. He stood aside and swung himself aboard as it passed. Other members of his platoon, already inside, grabbed him and hauled him in. A few yards further on another figure loomed out of the darkness and sprang aboard like a panther. A mortar bomb exploding behind them lit up the face of this latecomer … it was Matsushita, his lips working, eyes burning, speechless with excitement. Kikuchi sniffed carefully. Even if he had not seen the Lieutenant's face he could have told who it was by the strange odour, unlike anything he had ever smelled before, which came from him. He sniffed again. If electricity had a smell, that was what Matsushita would have smelled like at that moment.

Now the lorry had reached the dark haven which lay between the Hyderabads and the next British position. More tanks were following them, dark shapes on the moonlit road, and soon the sound of gunfire was left far behind. They drove on down the road as rapidly as they dared without lights in the wake of the two tanks which had taken over the lead. Nakamura's tank was now cruising immediately behind them.

On and on they went into the darkness. Kikuchi was in a trance, his mind whirling. He became aware presently that his mouth was open and that he was panting like a dog, his tongue hanging over his lower lip. It must be the heat, he thought. He closed his mouth and tried not to pant, afraid that Matsushita might regard it as a sign of fear. Now the word was passed back that the leading tank was approaching Milestone 61. Air reconnaissance had revealed further road-blocks at this point. The time was 4.30 a.m. It was still pitch dark. Kikuchi experienced a craving to see daylight once more.

Suddenly there was a flash and a violent explosion just ahead of them. The leading tank had struck a mine buried in the road: instantly the quiet night erupted into fire and uproar. Once more Kikuchi found himself tumbling out on to the road with his companions, screaming at the top of his lungs. Streams of tracer poured over his head from Nakamura's tank behind the lorry, so close that it seemed to scorch his cheek with its fiery breath.

In the darkness something hit him a sharp blow on the side of the head: perhaps the tail-gate of the lorry or the butt of someone's rifle. The blow dazed him; he stood still in a pool of darkness. It was like being in a cage of bright dotted lines criss-crossing each other … it was like a firework display: amid the rushing streams of fire from the tracer there bloomed and died magnificent white and orange chrysanthemums. The white lights which flickered and dribbled from pillboxes set back from the road might have been merely the sparklers which children hold in their hands. The air was alive, too, with the hum and whir of insect wings just as when cherry blossom covers the branches with its lovely foam in the spring and all the hives are busy. 'How beautiful! he thought for the second time. And he continued to stand there while enemy bullets fell so thickly around him that it was just like a sudden hailstorm rattling on the slopes of Mount Fuji. 'Look at this!' he marvelled, contemplating the way the bullets furrowed the soft tar of the road-surface like thick worms in the moonlight.

Suddenly his arm was roughly taken and he was thrown down again into the ditch at the side of the road. The shock brought him partly to his senses and he thought that perhaps an Englishman was at this moment fumbling with his shirt before slipping a knife between his ribs. But the voice which spoke to him spoke Japanese and belonged to Corporal Hayashi. Another tank had been immobilized near where they crouched, perhaps even that of Major Toda himself: its track, struck by a shot from an anti-tank rifle, had unrolled and lay flat on the road; nevertheless, its guns continued firing into the jungle. A few moments later the leading tank, attempting once again to batter a channel through the defences, touched off another mine and was wrecked. Small, dark shapes rose and fell against a patch of moonlit sky. Grenades! Corporal Hayashi paternally gripped Kikuchi's head and thrust it down into the ditch; Kikuchi felt the ground shake all around him. But the Corporal's grip on his neck had loosened and when Kikuchi raised his head again, the hand fell away. Hayashi had been struck on the temple by a fragment of shrapnel but his spectacles, untouched, continued to glint in a friendly way at Kikuchi.

Meanwhile, other tanks had come up and grouped themselves so close to each other that it seemed as if a battleship, guns blazing, had moored here in the middle of the jungle, pouring a steady, concentrated fire at each side of the road. Time passed. Another tank was knocked out by an anti-tank gun firing from a fortified position. More time passed. Still tracer zipped into the jungle, still the cannon and mortar boomed. The British fire, though, had diminished. The anti-tank guns were silent. Now the tanks had left their solid formation and were nudging into the jungle. Kikuchi could make out other figures huddled not far away in the cover of the ditch; among them Matsushita crouched, giving orders to the men with him. Soon they would make a bayonet charge to put an end to the stubborn resistance of the Punjabis.

Only a few yards from where Kikuchi waited for the fateful moment when he would have to leap up from the shelter of the ditch, Charlie Tyrrell was kneeling behind a buttress of earth in a litter of spent cartridges trying to estimate from the flashes of their guns whether the tanks were making any progress in their efforts to force a way through the defences. If the tanks could be held until daylight there might be some prospect of a counter-attack, either by the Argylls or by the Punjabis of the 28th Brigade who were resting some miles further back. On the other hand, his own battalion had already suffered such heavy losses from the tank barrage that he doubted whether they would be able to hold off a determined assault by the Japanese infantry. Charlie himself had so far escaped unscathed except for a flesh wound in the calf which had soaked one sock with blood causing it to squelch disagreeably when he walked; but this wound, combined with the shattering noise of the guns and his own fundamental weariness, cast him into a dream-like frame of mind in which he found it hard to think constructively. But even if his state of mind had been more normal he would have found it no easier; it was almost impossible in the darkness, with communications within the battalion difficult and those between the battalion and the Brigade H.Q. now severed, to form a clear idea of what was happening.

The Brigadier, meanwhile, was anxiously prowling about his headquarters in the rubber plantation. All the telephone wires had been cut by this time but he knew that, as he had expected, the Japanese had broken through the Hyderabads and had been halted, at least for a while, by the Punjabis. He now summoned a

despatch rider and sent him up the road to the Punjabis, ordering them to hold on to their positions by the road even if the Japanese tanks broke through. At the same time he ordered the Argylls to set up road-blocks.

It was the Argylls' habit to take breakfast early in order to fight on a full stomach. So, having breakfasted before dawn they set to work improvising road-blocks in the darkness, one where the trunk road first entered the rubber, the other a hundred yards in front of the bridge at Trolak (that is, the first of the two bridges the Japanese would reach): this road-block was covered by two armoured cars with anti-tank rifles; at the same time volunteers for a Molotov Cocktail party were called for and marshalled in readiness.

Though the sky was at last beginning to grow pale it was still very dark on the road. Sinclair, in his anxiety to find out how A and D Companies were faring in the rubber on the other side of the trunk road, borrowed a motor-cycle and set off on it rather unsteadily down the estate road from Brigade Head-quarters. As he came careering out of the rubber trees, going rather faster than he intended and meaning to cross the trunk road and follow the estate road which continued among the trees on the far side, a vast shape suddenly loomed out of the darkness. A Japanese tank! Swerving violently he crashed into it, almost head on … but luckily for Sinclair he was thrown clear. As the tank advanced, one of its tracks ran over the motor-cycle, flattened, it, chewed it up and dropped it on the roadway behind. Sinclair dusted himself off shakily as the tank disappeared on down the road into the darkness. 'Suh … suh … suh … suh … wine!' he shouted after it. 'You weren't carrying any bloody luh … luh … luh … headlights!' But all he could see, as he stood cursing beside his flattened motorcycle, was the rapidly diminishing flicker of the tank's exhaust. And then he thought: 'But my God! A Jap tank isn't supposed to be *here* at all!' And although he knew that by now it was almost certainly too late to warn anybody he began to run as fast as he could back the way he had come.

But if the tank had already passed through the long neck and out into the bottle itself, this meant that the Japanese had not only broken through the Punjabis position but that the first of the Argylls' obstacles where the trunk road left the jungle and entered the rubber had also failed to stop it. What had happened was that the Japanese tanks, which had been successfully stopped by the Punjabis on the trunk road, had found a way round them: for it so happened that the line which the trunk road now followed was not the original one. The original road had snaked through the defile with a number of sharp bends. When the road, in the process of being improved, had been straightened out, the disused loops of the original road had been left and no anti-tank defences had been provided for them. Thus it was that Nakamura's tank had discovered one of the disused loops and used it to circle around the British position, emerging in the rear. The Punjabis' resistance now at last collapsed. Charlie collected those men of his own contingent who were still able to walk and retreated with them into the jungle, hoping that they might be able to make their way back to the Slim River Bridge and the British lines. It was just beginning to grow light as Charlie and his men were swallowed up by the great dark-green wall of jungle. Subsequently nothing more would be seen or heard of them.

Now the tanks of Major Toda and Lieutenant Nakamura with two more medium tanks behind them (the very last of which had just flattened a motor-cycle) and a single lorry-load of infantry which included a dismayed Kikuchi and the reckless Matsushita, had brushed aside one pitiful road-block where the road left the jungle and surged on down the road. This was already a victory for they had broken through the defile and could now operate in the greater freedom of the rubber estate if it suited them. But Nakamura had his eye on an even greater feat of arms … to capture the two bridges before they could be blown up!

In no time the leading tanks had reached the second road-block which the Argylls had set up a hundred yards in front of the bridge at Trolak. This second obstacle, prepared in haste, was scarcely more impressive than the first, but it was covered by the two Argyll armoured cars, together with the Molotov Cocktail party lurking in the ditch with brimming jam jars and petrol-soaked rags. It was now just light enough to make out the forms of the tanks as they appeared out of the darkness and came to a halt, checked by the concrete blocks and chains across the road.

Once they were motionless the officer in command of the armoured cars gave the signal and, one from each side of the road, they opened up with their anti-tank rifles. But their shots merely glanced off the tanks' armour and ricocheted howling into the rubber. Now the cocktail party galloped up, flung their projectiles and hared away again for cover. Flames leaped up here and there and it seemed for a moment that one of the tanks had been set ablaze: but only the petrol which drenched its armour was on fire and presently it died out and the early morning gloom returned. In the meantime the tanks had turned their squat heads, as if in surprise, to look at the pitiful armoured cars which were opposing them. Their guns spoke. Instantly one armoured car was a smoking wreck, the other disabled. Tracer stitched up and down the Argyll's hastily prepared defences. The tanks' main armament and machine-guns continued to fire: to the boom of the guns and grenades and the chatter of small arms was added the frightful cracking of rubber trees in the estate behind.

Kikuchi and his comrades lay as flat as they could on the floor of the lorry as bullets ripped through the canvas awning above them. Even Matsushita was crouching down. But at this moment some instinct told him that the time had come and suddenly, grabbing a light machine-gun from the man beside him, he sprang out into the road. He was just in time to see the turret of the leading tank some yards ahead open up and Nakamura's head appear. While Major Toda's tank continued to blaze away to give him cover the heroic

Nakamura carrying his sabre clambered over the road-block. At the other end of the bridge it was now possible to make out the explosive charge which had been set against one of the pillars and even the wires which led back from it. With bullets kicking up the dust all around him Nakamura raced forward sabre in hand and Matsushita, dashing after him, was just in time to see a British soldier leap up to hurl a grenade: Matsushita cut him down with a burst of machine-gun fire. With a mighty slash of his sabre Nakamura severed the wires leading to the demolition charge, then turned and sprinted back towards his tank. It seemed impossible that he should get back alive through that storm of bullets but in a moment he had vaulted on to the nose of the tank and was slithering down like a snake into the safety of its hole. The turret-cover shut after him with a clang.

How long would it be before the tanks had burst through the roadblock in front of the bridge? With its motor roaring Nakamura's tank began to batter this light obstruction aside. In desperation the officer commanding the armoured cars, ignoring the fire from the tanks a mere hundred yards down the road, took the brake off the disabled armoured car and pushed it down the slight incline on to the bridge where he tried unsuccessfully to overturn it. But even this gallant effort could not hope to stop the tanks. With a grinding of metal and concrete Nakamura's tank had at last burst through on to the bridge, followed by that of Major Toda, guns still blazing. It took only a few moments to force aside the wrecked armoured car on the bridge. Once more the open road lay ahead.

On they raced in the direction of Kampong Slim, now in broad daylight. About a mile north of the village Nakamura, riding with head and shoulders out of his turret and surveying the road ahead like an eagle, saw movement. His eyes glittered. In an instant the turret-cover clanged shut again and the tank accelerated into a battalion of Punjabis of the 28th Brigade which had been hurriedly ordered forward by the Brigadier and were marching unsuspectingly up the road. The first company melted away under Nakamura's machine-gun fire; of the second company only a score of men escaped uninjured, while the two rear companies managed to dive into the rubber on each side of the road. At Kampong Slim the trunk road took a sharp turn to the left and ran eastwards through the Cluny Estate. Here Nakamura found further prey, a battalion of Gurkha Rifles moving along the road in column of route without the least suspicion that a Japanese tank might be in the vicinity: they suffered the same fate as the Punjabis, caught in close order by Nakamura's machine-guns and scythed down.

Next comes the turn of two batteries of the 137th Field Regiment dozing peacefully at the roadside in the Cluny Estate: one moment all is quiet and in good order, the next their camp is reduced to a smoking shambles and the tanks are moving on again. Major Toda would like to take the lead for already the greatest prize perhaps of the whole campaign is in reach: the Slim River Bridge itself! And so rapidly has the Toda tank company burst through the entire depth of the British defences that they find this vital bridge is defended by nothing more daunting than one troop of a Light Anti-Aircraft Battery equipped with Bofors guns, together with a party of sappers at work preparing the demolition of the bridge.

Just as one may sometimes see flights of terrified birds fleeing in front of a hurricane, now the Toda tank company is driving a random selection of vehicles in front of it. Men in lorries, in cars and on motor-cycles (even a man on horseback is to be seen galloping away though what he is doing there nobody knows); men pedal away furiously on bicycles and swerve up estate roads out of the path of the rumbling tanks. A party of signallers in a lorry rattles on to the bridge and shouts at the sappers who are putting the finishing touches to the charges laid against the far pillars and at the others who are unreeling the wire back to a safe distance to connect with the plunger: 'Jap tanks are coming! Jap tanks are coming!' Word is passed to the officer with the anti-aircraft guns. Only two of the Bofors will bear on the road. He prepares to fire over open sights and waits until he sees the first of the sinister vehicles surge into view, followed by another and another and another. At a hundred yards he opens fire on the leading tank but the light shells merely bounce off the tank's armour and depart screaming into the rubber. The tanks in turn open fire on the unprotected guns. In a few moments they are out of action; men lie dead and wounded around them in a cloud of smoke and dust.

Nakamura, cunningly, has refused to acknowledge Major Toda's attempts to take the lead and so the tracks of his tank are the first to thunder on to the long bridge. His eyes are on the explosive charge which is now so near; his eyes are on the sappers scattering into the rubber, two of them running with a reel unwinding between them. The hollow roar of the tracks on the bridge, the bridge itself seems to him to go on for ever. Nakamura, in the course of his earlier endeavour, has been wounded in the right hand and can no longer hold his sabre. Besides, rifle bullets are again zinging on the armour. He takes a machine-gun and directs it at the wire running along and away from the bridge until, yes, the bullets have severed it. The Slim River Bridge has been captured intact!

Major Toda orders one tank to remain guarding the bridge lest the British should return and try to demolish it. Then, Nakamura still in the lead, the other tanks move on a mile down the road in the direction of Tanjong Malim. It is now half past nine and the day is beginning to grow hot. Abruptly, the tanks find themselves in yet another formation of unsuspecting British troops moving up to the front line (which *they* still think is nineteen miles away). Nakamura at last has indulgently given up the lead to Lieutenant Ogawa. The British, although taken by surprise, will this time prove to be not such an easy prey, for this is the fine 155th Field Regiment. One detachment, working feverishly under a fusillade from the tanks, manages to unlimber its 4.5-inch howitzer; this gun opens fire from a mere thirty yards' range at the leading tank, smashing it. The

advance of the tanks is halted at last.

A little later, once the British had retired, Kikuchi inspected the wreckage of this tank. He found Lieutenant Ogawa, although dead, still sitting upright and holding his sabre. So ended the engagement at the Slim River.

49

In spite of the difficulties he had encountered with certain of the inmates of the dying-house which he had visited with Vera, Matthew could now only think of that institution with pleasure, for it had created a definite bond between them. There is something about a large number of dying people, provided you aren't one of them, that can make you feel extraordinarily full of vitality. Matthew and Vera, once they had emerged from that shadowy world, had found themselves positively seething with high spirits. At the door of the dying-house, as soon as each saw the unwrinkled face of the other, they had fumbled for each other's hands and gripped them tightly. Unfortunately, the complaints of the moribund smallholders had taken up so much time that they had been obliged to part again almost immediately, but this time not without making arrangements to meet again. Thus it happened that, in due course, they found themselves standing at the curved entrance to The Great World.

Vera saw Matthew's seductively curved spine while she was still some distance away, and her heart went pit-a-pat (no young men with fists of steel for her!) He was wandering up and down muttering to himself and occasionally lifting his knuckles to nudge his spectacles up on his nose. Once, evidently having forgotten what he was doing there, he began to stride away purposefully, but presently, remembering, came back. By this time, however, Vera had decided that it was best to step forward and announce herself. She took his arm and they strolled into The Great World. A mysterious tropical twilight prevailed in which bats skidded here and there, squeaking and clicking. Matthew was surprised to find The Great World still open despite the war which, after all, was now not very far away. There had been changes, however. For one thing, there were no longer as many lights burning; now there was merely a faint glow here and there against which you saw milling shadows silhouetted in the dusk. But the sensation of tropical mystery, the unfamiliar aromas and sensations, had redoubled in intensity and the crowds at this hour seemed scarcely less abundant. That atmosphere of cigar smoke and sandalwood, incense and perfume, that stirring compound of food and dust and citrus blossom, of sensuality and spices filled Matthew with such excitement that his spirit began flapping violently inside him like a freshly caught fish in a basket.

Matthew was thirsty. Spotting a group of shadowy figures drinking something at a stall he steered Vera towards it. They were drinking from straws stuck in coconuts which had been topped like boiled eggs. How delicious! But Vera diverted him. Coconut milk was not good for men, she explained.

'How d'you mean?'

Well, the Malays said it had a weakening effect of them, she murmured evasively, and directed him instead to another stall, insisting that he should partake of a strange, meaty, spicy soup of which she would only tell him the Chinese name (it was monkey soup, a powerful aphrodisiac). He tasted it and found it, well, rather strange. What did she say was in it? But again she would only tell him the Chinese name. The elderly, wizened Chinese who brewed it, who looked as if he himself was only on temporary leave from the dying-house, cackled with amusement at this burly warrior sharpening his jade arrows before loosing them at the Coral Palace. He stroked his wispy beard and peered into his vat of bubbling soup, remembering not without melancholy how in days gone by he had enjoyed an occasional bit of '*fang-shih*' himself.

Yes, it was not at all bad, Matthew decided when he had tasted it again. In no time he had finished the bowl and asked for a second helping. Delicious! He would have ordered a third helping but Vera thought he had probably had enough and so they strolled on through the smoky, crowded darkness. Here and there tapers glimmered, illuminating a circle of oriental faces and Matthew even noticed a few soldiers. One of the soldiers, however, had his arm in a sling; another had a thick bandage round his head; others were drunken but silent now, and morose. With dull eyes they watched the swirling cosmopolitan bustle around them, as if from the other side of a plate-glass window. No doubt these poor fellows had been invalided back from the fighting in the north. One could hardly expect them to look cheerful.

Vera was worried about the progress of the war. She had already told Matthew that she had first come to Singapore in order to escape the Japanese in Shanghai. Now, every day, despite what it said in the newspapers, the Japanese seemed to be coming nearer and nearer. Where would she go if they reached Singapore? she asked Matthew, looking innocent and defenceless, but perhaps wondering at the same time whether all the monkey soup he had consumed might not have put him in a protective frame of mind.

'Oh, don't worry, I'll look after you,' said Matthew protectively, folding her comfortingly in his arms (how light and lithe her body felt against his own!). 'Besides, I don't think we need to worry about them getting this far.' He nudged his spectacles up on his nose and added more cautiously: 'At least, I'll do my best. Let's talk about something more cheerful.' Vera agreed, aware that contact with this attractive man had caused her own *yin* essences to begin to flow in spite of her worries. They strolled on. Time passed in a dream. Presently, they found that The Great World was closing: these days, because of the war and the black-out, it was obliged to close early.

They spilled out of the gates in the departing crowd and sauntered through the warm darkness along a street of dilapidated shop-houses. A vast yellow moon was just rising over the tiled rooftops. A man with an ARP armband and a satchel over his shoulder flashed a torch in their faces and muttered something in Cantonese, but he did not try to stop them and they walked on. Matthew wanted her to return to the Mayfair with him but she refused with signs of indignation. She would not go where she was not wanted!

'But you *are* wanted! What are you talking about?'

'Mr Blackett and Miss Blackett have told me …'

'But it's nothing to do with them. The place belongs to me.'

'It doesn't matter. They behave badly. I am not going to fall over backwards to please them!'

'Oh, really!'

But Vera had upset herself by remembering this injury done her by the Blacketts. For a few moments she became tearful, even blaming Matthew for having allowed her to be slighted, though she was by no means sure how he could have prevented it. 'You should tell them to behave properly towards me,' she said sulkily. 'I am not going to Mayfair again.' As it happened, it would have suited her quite well to go to the Mayfair since she felt too ashamed of her own tenement cubicle to take Matthew back there; having taken up such a strong position, however, she felt she could not now abandon it without loss of face. There was a drinking establishment round the corner: perhaps one of the booths there would be free.

They entered an open doorway where a number of men and women, all Chinese, sat at tables drinking and playing mah-jong, some on the pavement, some inside where there was a little light. They passed between the tables and entered an even dimmer corridor where a strong smell of garlic hung on the stagnant air. The proprietor hurried along beside them, chattering, but Vera paid no attention to him. The corridor was lined with curtained booths and as she went along she opened and closed one curtain after another to look inside; in each of them a man and a woman sat close together, drinking; despite a rich atmosphere of sensuality, however, nothing untoward appeared to be happening. Vera grimaced at Matthew. There were no unoccupied booths and she felt that he could have been a bit more helpful in suggesting somewhere for them to go. But as usual Matthew's mind had wandered from the immediate problem, that of finding a place for them to be alone. His own voice had given him a shock a little earlier when he had heard it saying: 'The place belongs to me.' For it seemed to him that even this simple sentence cast its own moral shadow. The problem was this: could you own something like the Mayfair and still consider yourself a just man? But before he could properly get to grips with this question he glimpsed something in the last booth, where Vera had without ceremony opened and closed the curtain, which suggested a quite different line of enquiry. For in the last booth there were two startled Chinese men giving each other a rather peculiar handshake. What were they doing? he asked Vera.

'I don't know,' she shrugged. 'Perhaps secret society?'

'D'you think that was the Singapore Grip?'

But Vera shook her head, smiling. She found his question so entertaining that her impatience with Matthew melted away.

All the booths were full. There was nothing for it, therefore, but to take Matthew back to where she lived. They set out once more into the warm darkness of the city and as they went along Vera tried to prepare him for the shock of seeing the tenement where she lived which was not far from the river at New Bridge Road. Presently, they were standing in front of it. She sighed at the smell of drains and the peeling paint and the huddled shapes you had to step over as you climbed the stairs, by no means sure that she had not made a mistake in bringing Matthew here. How sweet-smelling the air of Tanglin was by comparison! Thank heaven that at least she did not have to share her cubicle with several other people like her neighbours!

Still wondering about the Singapore Grip Matthew followed her along what he supposed must be a corridor, but a corridor in which people evidently made their homes; he found himself stepping over an ancient man with a face like a road map, asleep on the stairs over a pipe with a long metal stem. There was no light to speak of, just one naked bulb at the head of the stairs and a slender shaft of moonlight from a window in the distance … but there was enough to see the darker lumps of darkness that lay in neat rows along the walls on each side. He knew instantly, without knowing *how* he knew, which of these bundles were property and which were people. There was a smell in the air, too, besides the smell of drains that Vera was worried about … he recognized it, a vaguely smoky smell, as of smouldering rubbish or rags, the smell of poverty.

These walls on each side, however, proved not to be walls at all, but merely flimsy wooden partitions. Originally this floor had comprised perhaps three or four large rooms, but in order to maximize the rent from it the landlord had subdivided it into a vast number of cubicles not much bigger than cupboards, separated from the corridor by hanging clothes or bead curtains. Matthew peered into some of these dark receptacles as he passed by, but one had to go carefully for fear of treading on the hand or face of an exhausted coolie who had slumped out into your path: in one of them a little old lady with her hair in a bun was on her knees, muttering prayers in front of a scroll of red ideographs with red candles and joss-sticks smouldering beside her; in another a family was grouped around a blue flame eating rice. Someone was coughing wearily nearby, a long, wretched, tubercular cough, the very sound of resignation or despair. So this was what life was like here!

Vera's cubicle, by comparison with the others, was comfortable: it was at the end of the corridor not far

from where the only tap dripped into a bucket and it shared half a window with the next cubicle. It was very small (Matthew could have crossed it in one stride) but neat and had a little furniture: the iron bed which for Vera symbolized her Russian ancestry, a table made from the door of a wardrobe resting on a tea-chest, on which, in turn, rested a mirror and a few little bottles of cosmetics. There was an oil-lamp and a Primus stove; biscuit-coloured tatami covered the floor. The clothes passed on to her by Joan hung beside the window (her Chinese clothing had been packed away in mothballs under the bed) with a pair of wooden clogs and a pair of leather shoes neatly arranged beneath them. On the floor by the Primus stove were two bowls and a saucepan; a jam jar contained chopsticks and a porcelain spoon.

While Vera lit the oil-lamp Matthew stood uncertainly beside her with his hands in his pockets, touched by the simplicity of her home. When there was enough light to see each other by they both felt embarrassed. To conceal her shyness Vera began to rummage unnecessarily in her handbag. Matthew gazed at the pictures torn from magazines which were pinned to the partition by the bed: there was a picture of someone whom he supposed must be the last Tsar of Russia, looking very hairy, and another of King George VI and another of Myrna Loy. He sat down on the bed beside which there was a pile of movie magazines and some books. Three or four of the books were in Chinese (among them, though he did not know it, a treatise on sexual techniques, for Vera took such matters seriously); there was a copy of *Self-Help* indented with the stamp of the American Missionary Society, Harbin, and a tattered collection of other books in English, including Waley's *170 Chinese Poems*, once the property of the United Services Club and Percy F. Westerman's *To the Fore with the Tanks*, much scribbled on in red pencil by a child.

Vera sat down on the bed beside him. She no longer experienced the slippery sensation she had felt before and which she usually felt when aroused. Concerned with the impression that her room might be making on her visitor the flow of her *yin* essences had declined to a trickle. She sensed, too, that Matthew's *yang* force had also been diverted into another channel and now lacked the fierce concentration of the unbridled *yang* spirit.

Indeed, Matthew, sitting quietly in this dimly lit cubicle, not much bigger, he supposed, than the closet where a man like Walter Blackett would hang his suits, was again brooding on the question of property and wondering whether it was possible to be wealthy and yet to live a just life. For, in a competitive society, how could you be wealthy in a vacuum? Were you not wealthy *against* other people poorer than you? No matter how justly you tried to behave, and did behave, no matter how honest and charitable and sympathetic to suffering, did not this possession of wealth, which allowed you to go to the opera and drink fine wines now and then, which made your experience of life less harsh in almost every way, cast a subtle blight over all your aspirations? Could someone live justly in Tanglin while at the same time people lived in this wretched tenement riddled with malnutrition and tuberculosis (he could still hear that weary, relentless coughing through the partitions)? This question was quite apart from the fact that the man coughing had been sucked into Malaya by the great implosion of British capital invested in cheap tropical land and labour, for it could certainly be strongly argued that he was a beneficiary rather than the victim of British enterprise, including that of Blackett and Webb among others. He put a comforting arm round Vera's shoulders, thinking that she must not stay here to catch tuberculosis from her neighbours and at the same time wondering how one should behave in order to live justly.

Vera, meanwhile, with Matthew's arm around her had begun to feel slippery again, so that presently, if you had tried to grasp her, she would have sprung out of your fingers like a bar of soap in the bathtub. She wriggled closer and put an arm around his waist. This, in turn, had a certain effect on Matthew for the monkey soup had not ceased to flow richly in his veins. The *yang* spirit, which had been dozing like a tiger in its cave, was abruptly awoken by that lithe yet slippery arm which had encircled his waist: now it came snarling out of its lair, determined to be satiated, come what might.

Without receiving conscious instructions from their owner, Matthew's hands began to wander over Vera's clothes and in due course found some buttons. But the buttons proved to be ornamental and so, after a considerable interval of pulling and tugging which was plainly getting his hands nowhere, Vera decided that they would have to be discreetly helped in the right direction, though this tended to undermine the impression of surprised innocence she had been hoping to convey. Even this did not really improve matters, however, because Matthew's fingers were made clumsy by theoretical instructions which began belatedly to arrive from his brain. Finally, Vera had to become thoroughly practical and take off all her clothes herself: they did not amount to much, anyway, and if crumpled up would easily have fitted into one of Matthew's pockets. Matthew also took the opportunity to remove his own clothes and, as he did so, a dense cloud of white dust rose from his loins and hung glimmering in the lamplight. Vera looked surprised at so much dust, wondering whether his private parts might not be covered in cobwebs too. But Matthew hurriedly explained that it was just talcum from his evening bath. Once this had been settled the twin rivers of *yin* and *yang* which, though flowing in the same direction, one in shadow, the other in sunlight, had been separated by a range of mountains, now begun to turn gently towards each other as the mountains became hills and the hills sloped down to the wide valley.

And yet before the rivers joined, one river flowing into the other, the other flowing into the one, there was still some way to go. Vera, who had carefully educated herself in the arts of love, did not believe that this sacred art, whose purpose was to unite her not only with her lover but with the earth and the firmament, too,

should take place in the Western manner which to her resembled nothing so much as a pair of drunken rickshaw coolies colliding briefly at some foggy cross-roads at the dead of night. But in order to do things properly it was clear that she would have to give Matthew a hasty but basic education in what was expected of him. For one thing, a common terminology had to be established; Matthew's grasp of such matters had proved even more elementary than she had feared. Indeed, he seemed thoroughly bewildered as he stood there naked and blinking, for he had taken off his spectacles and put them down on the pile of books by the bed. So Vera set to work giving names to various parts, first pointing them out where applicable on Matthew, then on her own pretty person.

'This is called "*kuei-tou*" or "*yü-ching*" or, how d'you say, hmm, "jade flower-stem" … or sometimes "*nan-ching*" or even "*yang-feng*", OK?' But Matthew could only gaze at her in astonishment and she had to repeat what she had said.

'Now d'you think you've got it?' she enquired, and could not help adopting the rather condescending tone which had once been adopted by the missionary who had taught her English years ago.

'You mean, all those words mean that?' asked Matthew, indicating the part in question.

'Well, not literally, of course. One, you see, means "head of turtle", another "jade stalk" and so on … but they all add up to that, d'you see now?' Vera was becoming a little impatient.

'I'm not sure …'

'Look, I just tell you names for things, OK? We talk about it later.'

Matthew agreed, still looking baffled.

'Here is called "*yin-nang*" or "secret pouch" and here on me is called …' but Matthew had not been properly paying attention and all this had to be repeated, too. He was shown the '*yü-men*' or the '*ch'iung-men* as it was sometimes known and that naturally led them on to the '*yü-tai*' and, from the particular to the general, to '*fang-shih*' or '*ou-yu*'. Vera held forth on all this with rapidity, certainly, but not without touching on the Five Natural Moods or Qualities which he might expect to find in himself, nor the Five Revealing Signs which should be manifested by his partner: the flushing pink of throat and cheeks, perspiration on nose like dew on grass in the morning, depth and rapidity of breathing, increase of slipperiness and so forth. And Matthew found himself obliged also to acquire a working knowledge of the Hundred Anxious Feelings (though there was no time to go through them one by one), the Five Male Overstrainings, and the medicinal liquor that he might expect to lap up from his lover's body at the Three Levels, for example, that sweet little cordial called Liquid Snow exuding from between the breasts at the Middle Level (good for gall-stones).

Vera could now see that the mighty *yang* spirit which, a little earlier, had seized Matthew and held him up by the ears like a rabbit, was no longer gripping him so firmly. She decided to content herself with once more running over the names of the most important parts so there would be no misunderstanding. And it was lucky she did so because it turned out that there was a part she had forgotten to mention the first time, namely, the '*chieh-shan-chu*' or 'pearl on jade threshold'. Drawing up her knees to her chin she pointed it out with a magenta fingernail.

Matthew peered at her, blinking. He could not for the life of him think why all this elaborate 'naming of parts' should be necessary. However, he bent his head obediently to look for the '*chieh-shan-chu*'. After some moments of inspecting her closely he brought the oil-lamp a little closer and put his spectacles on again.

'Oh yes, I think I see what you mean,' he murmured politely.

'Good,' said Vera. 'Now we can begin.'

Matthew brightened and after a moment's hesitation took off his spectacles again. But what Vera meant was that she could now begin to explain what he would need to know in order to bring to a successful conclusion their first and relatively simple manoeuvre, known as 'Bamboo Swaying in Spring Wind'. After that they might have a go at 'Butterfly Hovering over Snow White Peony' and then later, if all went well, she might wake up a girlfriend who slept in a neighbouring cubicle and invite her to join them for 'Goldfish Mouthing in Crystal Tank' if they were not too tired by then. But for the moment Matthew still had a few things to learn.

'What is it you don't understand, Matthew?' she enquired with the monolithic patience she had so admired in her missionary teacher. Matthew sighed. It was clear that some more time would elapse before the rivers of *yin* and *yang* reached their confluence at last. All this time the sound of weary coughing had not ceased for a moment.

50

No doubt there were many unexpected developments in Singapore in the first two weeks of January but few can have been as unexpected as that which affected the Blacketts and the Langfields. How could it have come about that these two families which had hitherto held each other in such abhorrence and contempt should, after so many years, establish amicable social relations? Any close observer (Dr Brownley, for instance, who had made what amounted to a hobby of the mutual detestation of one family for the other) would have found it most unlikely that the Blacketts would ever issue an invitation and quite improbable that the Langfields would accept it. Nevertheless, it did come about. It came about under the pressure of circumstances, as the head of each family became concerned for the welfare of his women-folk.

Walter and Solomon Langfield, bumping into each other by chance at the Long Bar of the Singapore Club, as they had done, indeed, week in, week out, for the better part of thirty years, happened at last to recognize each other. Recognition led to a wary offer of a *stengah*, made in a manner so casual that it was almost not an offer at all, and an equally wary acceptance. In a little while they were patting each other on the back and bullying each other pleasantly for the privilege of signing the chit. And, although each time one of them cordially scribbled his signature on the pad which the barman handed to him he might secretly have been thinking: 'I knew as much … The old blighter is "pencil shy" (the quintessence of meanness in the clubs of Singapore), outwardly at least no ripple of discord was allowed to corrugate this new-found friendship. Soon Walter was confiding to old Langfield his anxiety for his wife and daughters. This, it turned out, exactly mirrored a similar concern, 'since the RAF did not seem to be putting up much of a show', that Solomon felt for Mrs Langfield and little Melanie beneath the bombs. The women should be sent to a safer place, it was agreed, perhaps to Australia where both firms had branch offices. But neither Mrs Langfield nor Mrs Blackett would be very good at fending for herself. Why should they not travel together? Together they would manage much better. Perhaps by pulling some strings it might be possible for Monty or young Nigel Langfield to accompany them. And so in no time it had been agreed: it only remained to persuade the women that this was the best course.

'By the way, Blackett,' old Solomon Langfield was unable to resist saying with ill-concealed malice as they prepared to go their separate ways, 'it's bad luck about your jubilee. I suppose you'll have to call it off under the present circumstances.'

'Not at all,' replied Walter coldly. 'We've been asked to go ahead with it for the sake of civilian morale. I hope you don't mean to call yours off?'

'We aren't due to have ours for another couple of years,' Solomon Langfield, out-manoeuvred and cursing inwardly, was forced to admit.

'Oh? I didn't realize that we had been established longer than you and Bowser,' said Walter condescendingly.

'By that time, at any rate,' replied Solomon, trying to recover the ground he had lost, 'we should be at peace again and able to do things properly.'

'By *that* time,' retorted Walter, delivering the *coup de grâce*, 'another war will probably have broken out or heaven knows what will have happened.'

When Walter mentioned evacuation to Australia in the company of the Langfield women to his own family, however, his proposal was received with indignation and dismay. To travel with Langfields was bad enough, but to be expected to live cheek by jowl with them in Australia was more than flesh and blood could endure. Joan flatly refused to consider leaving with anybody, let alone a Langfield. There was a war on and plenty for an able-bodied young woman to do in Singapore! As for Kate, she was alarmed at the prospect of having as a constant companion Melanie, whom she considered capable of any outrage or excess. For there were times, particularly when there was some authority to be flouted, when Melanie's behaviour verged on the insane, so it seemed to Kate. Now, while she listened to her parents arguing, she remembered an occasion at school when the girls in her dormitory had planned a midnight feast. It had been agreed that each of them would contribute something to eat or drink, a couple of biscuits saved from tea-time, say, or a bottle of lemonade crystals. She remembered how they had all crouched, shivering and breathless with excitement, on the waxed floor between two beds, each producing what she had managed to collect … until last of all, Melanie, with an air of triumph had slapped something down on the floor with a dull thud. An enormous dead chicken! She had somehow broken into the caretaker's chicken coop, strangled a chicken, plucked it and here it was! Well, it seemed to Kate that someone who instead of a bar of chocolate or a couple of Marie biscuits brought a raw chicken to a midnight feast could hardly be called sane. What would she get up to in Australia with only her mother to restrain her?

Monty, on the other hand, brightened up when he heard that there was a prospect of either Nigel Langfield or himself accompanying the women-folk to safety. He believed he could count on Nigel to show the necessary courage and foolishness to insist on sticking it out at his post. Things had not been going well recently for Monty but now they might be looking better. In the meantime he was having to fight a determined rear-guard action with medical certificates from Dr Brownley to prevent himself being enlisted in the Local Defence Corps. The air-raids, too, increasingly alarmed him. Well, if there was a chance of escorting women to safety only an idiot would linger in Singapore to be bombed. He would crack off to Australia and take charge of the firm's office there … as an 'essential occupation' that should keep him out of the beastly Army, with luck.

But after a day or two Monty's spirits sank again. No European men were being allowed to leave without special permission and it soon became clear that such permission would not be granted to either himself or Nigel under the present circumstances despite more string-pulling by both Walter and Solomon. Evidently some spiteful little official in some office was seizing his opportunity to pay off a grudge against the merchant community. And *he* had to suffer!

In due course it was decided that Kate and Melanie and their mothers should leave for Australia on the *Narkunda*, sailing in mid-January. Walter agreed provisionally that Joan should stay a little longer but insisted that she would have to follow her mother if the situation got any worse. The truth was that Walter had need of Joan in Singapore, not only to supervise the running of the household in the absence of his wife, but also to

lend a hand in the increasingly frantic work involved in administering Blackett and Webb's affairs from temporary offices in Tanglin, for by now the air-raids on the docks, spasmodic hitherto, had made continued occupation of the premises on Collyer's Quay too dangerous. Moreover, Walter still had not quite given up hope that Matthew might suffer a change of heart and decide he must marry Joan, after all. This match was such a good idea! That was what upset Walter, to see a good idea go to waste. There persisted in his mind the feeling that in some way Joan's marriage could still be the foundation of Blackett and Webb's recovery. But how? It was an instinct, nothing more.

An impetus was needed, that much was certain! Whether or not Singapore might survive as a military strong-point in the Far East it was clear that as a business centre it was finished for some time to come. As a result all Walter's efforts were now directed towards the running-down of the company's Singapore operations, the transferring of business to branches overseas in Britain, America and Australia and the suspension of that which could not be transferred.

And there still remained as a reminder of his own weakness those vast quantities of rubber in his godowns on the Singapore River. He had barely been able to shift a fraction of it. Nor was it any comfort to tell himself that he was the victim of circumstances beyond his control. Difficulties are made to be overcome! A businessman must shape his own environment to suit his needs: once he finds himself having to submit to it he is doomed. Once, years ago, while leafing through a copy of *Wide World*, he had come across a blurred photograph which, for reasons which he had not understood, had made a great impression on him. Well, if he had not understood it then, he certainly understood it now! It was a photograph, very poorly printed, of some dying animal, perhaps a panther or a leopard, it was hard to tell. Too weak to defend itself, this animal was being eaten alive by a flock of hideous birds. Walter had never been able to forget that picture. He had thought of it not long ago while standing at old Mr Webb's bedside. And now he thought of it again, reflecting that there comes a time, inevitably, when the strong become, first weak, then helpless.

Walter knew very well, mind you, that other rubber merchants shared at least some of his own difficulties. Even old Solomon Langfield had admitted in an unguarded moment that he had large stocks waiting on the quays for a carrier. This was no comfort, however: Walter had always held in contempt businessmen who excused their own failures by matching them with those of other people. There was a way of shipping that rubber, he knew, just as there was a way of doing everything. But the present state of the docks baffled and exhausted him: the quays were jammed with shipping still loaded with war material said to be urgently needed by the military. Yet nobody was doing anything about it: the labour force had largely decamped, doubtless because they were unwilling to risk their lives under constant air-raids; what unloading was taking place was being done by the troops themselves: Walter had tried to suggest to a military acquaintance that these same men should reload with rubber 'urgently needed for the War Effort elsewhere', but the man had looked at him as if he were out of his mind.

Walter, even in his weakened state, had been stubborn enough to keep on trying. He had paid another visit to the Governor, suggesting that he might intercede with the War Council to provide a labour company under military discipline (which might encourage them to turn up for work) in order to start reloading the great backlog of rubber before it was too late. But Sir Shenton Thomas had barely listened to him. Although he was normally sympathetic to the Colony's mercantile community, he had shown visible signs of impatience with Walter's difficulties. That stuffed shirt! He had hardly even taken the trouble to make an excuse, muttering something about it being all he could do to prevent the military from commandeering what labour was already available to the rubber industry … Relations with Malaya Command and Singapore Fortress, already bad at the outbreak of war, had got worse … Walter would kindly realize that the community had other needs, above all civil defence, besides his own … Well! Walter had come close to asking him whose taxes he thought paid his bloody salary! Affronted, he had taken his leave. The bales of rubber, in their thousands of tons, had continued to sleep undisturbed in their godowns.

And yet this was the moment, Walter knew in his heart, to adopt some resolute plan, perhaps to conscript a labour force of one's own by closing down other aspects of the business, certain of which would soon close down anyway of their own accord, by transferring estate labour (such of it as had not yet been overrun by the advancing Japanese) to the docks, by offering double wages if necessary, anything provided that rubber was shifted. It was no good for Walter, isolated and overworked as he was, to tell himself that he must not let that rubber get out of proportion … What was it compared to the rubber which had passed through his hands in his time? Nothing! … It seemed to him like a tumour, disfiguring his career in Singapore. And like a tumour it continued to grow because, although diminished in quantity by the Japanese advance and by the increasingly chaotic state of the roads in Johore, new consignments of rubber continued to arrive from across the Causeway.

The fact was that all the options Walter considered were hedged around with administrative difficulties through which he could see no way. In desperation he even considered, though only for a moment, the possibility of forming a co-operative labour force with other firms in a similar, if less acute, predicament … perhaps even with Langfield and Bowser. But that solution, which was probably the only one capable of realization in practice, was denied to Walter by the competitive habits of a lifetime. He could hardly enter into such an agreement without revealing the sheer size of his stocks to his rivals, who would know immediately by the amount of rubber he had waiting that he had made a grotesque miscalculation. To go cap

in hand to old Solomon Langfield in Blackett and Webb's jubilee year to propose such a scheme was more than he could bring himself to do. But at this point fate, in the shape of a Japanese bomb, took a hand.

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Even taking into account the new-found amity between the two families, you would hardly have expected to see what you now *did* see at the Blacketts' house, the extraordinary spectacle of lions lying down with lambs and scarcely even licking their lips. Walter found himself sitting at his own dining-table surrounded, it seemed, by nothing but Langfields. Even more unexpected was the fact that a similar scene had taken place yesterday and would take place again tomorrow … though with the women-folk subtracted, for this was the eve of their departure for Australia. What then was the explanation? For this was not, needless to say, the company that Walter would have chosen for his evening meal, including as it did, old Solomon Langfield with a slightly condescending expression on his cunning old face and young Nigel, who looked almost human by comparison, sitting next to Joan.

The Langfields on the whole looked subdued, which Walter found reasonably gratifying. Nor was this simply because their family was about to be sundered. The Langfields had suffered a misfortune. A bomb jettisoned at random by a Japanese plane had fallen in Nassim Road, partly destroying their house. None of them had been hurt, fortunately, except for a few scratches. Since the damage had only been to property Walter had felt himself permitted at first to treat the matter as a joke. At the Club, chuckling, he had entertained his friends with what he claimed was an eye-witness description of 'the bomb on the bear-garden'. The rats and cockroaches that had poured out of the smoking ruins had been nobody's business! And poor oldSolomon wandering about howling with grief. Why? Because he kept his money under his mattress, as everyone knew, and it had been blown up with the rest of the bear-garden! After a while, however, Walter fell silent, having realized that some of his audience were not relishing his joke at Langfield's expense quite as much as he did himself. But Walter was fundamentally a kind-hearted man and he could see that, after all, having your house destroyed could have its unpleasant side. And so he had generously made amends by inviting the Langfields to stay at his house until they had managed to re-establish themselves in their own; besides, since the women-folk were going off together it made sense for the two families to be under the same roof for a while. Walter was considered at the Singapore Club to have emerged, after a shaky start, very creditably from the Langfields' misfortune, given the legendary antipathy between the two families.

Solomon, as it happened, was not looking particularly well. He was getting on in years and had reached the age when a person finds it hard to adjust to a sudden shock like the destruction of his house. Mrs Langfield had confided in Mrs Blackett (the two ladies, having swallowed the distaste of years in a few minutes, had discovered that they had everything in common and had quite as much gossip backed up over the years as Walter had rubber in his warehouses) that it had taken some time for the poor old fellow to be coaxed out of the ruins. He had wanted to stay on there, it appeared! With ceilings which might collapse at any moment! And when he had been told of the invitation to the Blacketts' he had grown more stubborn than ever. In the end Nigel had had to accept the invitation on his behalf and Dr Brownley had had to make a personal visit to the shattered house in Nassim Road to dislodge the old boy.

Dr Brownley, seated opposite old Solomon, might well have been thinking that the old man's face had an unhealthy cast, yellowish with brightly flushed patches. But as a matter of fact he was concentrating more on his supper which was exceptionally appetizing. Walter, drumming absently on the table with a crust of 'health bread', for to the indignation of Tanglin the Cold Storage had stopped baking white bread on Government orders, surveyed the table and reflected that tomorrow, when the women had sailed for Australia, he would at last have time to get down to some serious work. He would miss them, no doubt, but that could not be helped. Besides, there was always Joan.

At the end of the table Matthew had become involved in a heated discussion with Nigel, odd snatches of which reached Walter's distracted ears … something about colonial policy during the Depression. Matthew, Walter had to admit, had turned out a disappointment. He had grown somewhat thinner during his weeks in Singapore but no less excitable and opinionated. Why, the other day he had even asserted that the European estates had swindled inarticulate native smallholders out of their share of Malaya's rubber exports under the Restriction Scheme. And how, Walter had enquired with an ironical smile, did we manage to do that? How did we manage to do that when assessment was under Government control? The estates had managed to do it through their creature, the Controller of Rubber! By packing the committee formed to 'advise' him … that was to say, to give him instructions for whatever they wanted to be done so that he could apply the official stamp to them!

'Don't be an idiot!'

'I'm not saying you did anything illegal, just that you used your influence to bend the rules in your favour. Isn't that the way it's always done? Come to think of it, that's what my father and his cronies did in the rice trade in Rangoon all those years ago. I suppose that's what business out here consists of.'

Walter had spoken sharply at this point. He was not ready to listen to Matthew saying anything against old Mr Webb who had been the very soul of recitude and one of the pillars of the Singapore community His was

an example of honesty and industry which Matthew would do well to follow instead of … of … Walter had been about to say 'carrying on with half-caste women' but thought better of it at the last moment. He had heard reports that Matthew had been seen with Miss Chiang but did not want to bring the matter up until he was more sure of his ground, for it was out of the question for a Webb to be seen associating openly with a *'stengah'*, particularly in Blackett and Webb's jubilee year. '… Instead of wasting your time,' he had finished rather weakly. Matthew had abandoned the subject, looking depressed.

Matthew was now saying, 'Far from doing anything to help our colonies foster their own native industries the Colonial Office sees to it that any which begin to develop are promptly scotched!'

'Why should they do that?' scoffed Nigel Langfield, under the approving eye of his elders. 'I say, Mr Blackett, what d'you think, sir? Isn't that just the nonsense that the Nationalists are always spouting?'

'Why?' demanded Matthew heatedly. 'Because we want to sell our own goods. We don't want competition from the natives: we want to keep them on the estates producing the raw materials we need.'

'Absolute poppycock, old boy,' chuckled Nigel. 'Westminster has done a jolly great deal with grants to build up industry in the colonies.'

'Grants, certainly … but what for? So that they could buy British capital equipment for bridges and railways. The only purpose of these grants was to deal with unemployment in Britain. Funds were produced so that the unfortunate colonies could buy equipment which they could ill afford and which was of dubious advantage to them, though it probably *was* to the advantage of the European businesses established in the colonies!'

Walter could not help glancing at old Solomon Langfield to see how he was responding to these unfortunate remarks. Ah, it was as he feared! On the man's sickly face an expression of amazement and disgust had appeared. Glancing up swiftly the wily old fellow caught Walter's eye before he had time to look away. Promptly his expression changed to one of sarcasm, even glee, as if to say: 'So this is the sort of degenerate talk that goes on in the Blackett household … I might have known!' But perhaps Walter had merely imagined that his old rival was gloating over him: a moment later Solomon had dropped his chin wearily to his plate once more. He really did look rather ill. Perhaps it was just as well that the doctor was at hand. Much as he detested the Langfields Walter did not particularly want one to die under his roof.

'In Burma during the Depression there was such a high tax on matches that the natives started a flourishing local industry making cheap cigarette lighters. Guess what happened. The Government, disliking the loss of revenue, suppressed it by instituting heavy fines! Well, by an interesting coincidence the same thing happened in the Dutch East Indies. There, too, cheap cigarette lighters threatened the revenue from matches. But the Dutch allowed them to continue making the lighters on the grounds that it created employment. And the same goes for many other local industries, too … The result is that the Dutch East Indies now have a spinning industry and instead of importing *sarongs* they make their own. The same goes for soap, cigarettes and any number of other things. There's even a native bank to finance native enterprises! And what have we been doing? We've seen to it that even basic things like nails still have to be imported from Britain!'

'Oh, that's all very well,' blustered Nigel. 'Anyone can quote isolated facts, but that just distorts the overall picture.' And Nigel flushed, nettled by Matthew's tone and conscious that he had not emerged from this arguement as well as he had hoped, particularly with the beautiful Joan Blackett sitting in silent judgement at his elbow. What a smasher she was! Nigel particularly liked the way the light fell on her curly hair, making it glow like … like …

'Matthew doesn't know anything, Nigel, about what things are really like here,' said Joan suddenly and in such a bitter tone that even Nigel peered at her in surprise, delighted, however, that she should take his side.

Walter had been listening attentively to the exchange between the two young men at the end of the table. As he listened his face had darkened and the bristles on his spine had risen, causing his Lancashire cotton shirt and even the jacket of his linen suit to puff up into a hump. Distracted though she was by her imminent departure, Mrs Blackett had noticed the warning signs and held her breath, afraid lest her husband explode at any moment. But just as it had seemed that an explosion of rage was inevitable, Walter's thoughts had abruptly been diverted into a more soothing channel by his daughter's defence of Nigel. And so promising was this new channel that within a few moments those horrid bristles had subsided and were nestling peacefully once more flat against Walter's coarse pink skin. Walter had begun to have ideas about young Nigel Langfield.

Walter had known Nigel since childhood; according to the general proposition that Langfields only became odious and unsuitable on reaching puberty, he had often been permitted to come as a child to play with Monty just as now Melanie came to play with Kate. And naturally, even after Nigel had made the change from acceptable tadpole to unacceptable frog, Walter had continued to see him here or there for they belonged, of course, to the same clubs and it was inevitable that the young man should crop up in Walter's field of vision over the years carrying now a tennis racket, now a briefcase, Singapore being a very small world, after all. Nevertheless it was only now that the bombed-out Langfields had assembled under his roof that Walter was at last really able to form an opinion about the young man: on the whole he had been agreeably surprised. Nigel had the right ideas. He was not, like Monty, a wash-out. On the contrary, from what he had overheard passing between Nigel and his father the young man was already active in the affairs of Langfield and Bowser. Walter, preoccupied though he was this evening with other matters, had not failed to notice that every now and again Nigel's eyes would surreptitiously come to rest on Joan and contemplate her avidly. A young man's normal

stirrings of lust, perhaps? No, Walter did not think so. He believed that there might be more to it than that. For Nigel was making every effort to be agreeable to Joan and once or twice, for no apparent reason, a deep blush had stained the young man's cheeks, which were, incidentally, still pleasantly freckled like those of a child.

Yes, Walter was still faced with the problem of finding a husband for Joan. How times had changed that he should now be giving serious consideration to an offspring of the Langfields! But a businessman must adapt his views to meet changing times; otherwise he will be left high and dry. Walter had not forgotten (how often had he not repeated it to little Monty when the lad was still in the nursery) the fate of the rice-millers in London who had gone to their doom because they had been unable to foresee the effects that the opening of the Suez Canal would have on their trade. A man must move with the times. If a union of the Blacketts and the Langfields was what the times called for, then so be it. Moreover, the more Walter thought about it, the more it seemed to him that this might be the master-stroke that solved all his problems simultaneously. If the two firms were merged into a new company, Blackett, Webb and Langfield, then the danger that Matthew Webb might one day use his holdings to force some independent, hare-brained, moralistic policy on the Blackett interest would automatically disappear. Matthew's stake would be diluted. Of course, he would have the problem of imposing his will on the Langfield interest but old Solomon would not last for ever and Walter was confident that with Joan's help he could deal easily enough with young Nigel. Why, a union of the two families might even help him solve the more immediate problem of shipping his rubber by putting him in a better position to suggest some joint solution of the difficulty to Solomon.

Mr Webb would not have approved of such a match as Walter was now contemplating. But no matter, Walter thought with a grim chuckle, old Webb was dead and from the grave a man's influence on the board of directors is much reduced. Nor would his wife approve … but tomorrow Sylvia would be on her way to Australia. As for Monty, trained to detest Langfields the way a police-dog is trained to leap for the throats of burglars, he might not like it but then his opinion was of no account. For a moment Walter's eye rested sadly on his only son. Why could he not have turned out like one of Harvey Firestone's boys? As if aware of his father's disappointment Monty looked up at that moment. 'What's biting the old man?' he wondered. 'Perhaps there's something he wants me to do?' But the next moment his thoughts had returned to browse on his own problems which, like his father's, were manifold. How was he to get out of this hole, Singapore, with his skin in one piece? And, a more immediate problem, how was he to get through another dreary evening when he had seen almost every film in town? The only one poor Monty had not seen was Myrna Loy in *Third Finger, Left Hand*. Could you beat it! That was certain to be the sort of romantic rubbish to which he would normally have given a wide berth. But if that's all there was then there was nothing else he could do. He would have to put up with it. '*Third Finger, Left Hand* indeed!' he thought grimly as he tackled his pudding. 'Why am I being punished like this?'

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'A businessman must move with the times!' Two hours had passed and calm had descended on the Blacketts' household once more, but Walter's train of thought had not made much progress. Now he and Solomon Langfield and the doctor sat on the unlit verandah smoking cigars; upstairs, after an abortive attempt to be allowed to stay up late on this their last night in Singapore, Kate and Melanie were lying almost naked on their beds complaining of the heat and calling each other 'darling' in affected tones: Melanie was still hoping to be rescued from this early banishment by an air-raid and planned to cause a sensation, if the Japanese obliged, by appearing in the Blacketts' improvised shelter wearing no more clothes than she was at present. Kate was less unhappy than she had expected to be at the prospect of leaving, partly because her father had agreed after a great deal of persuasion that her beloved cat, Ming Toy, might accompany her to Australia. Mrs Langfield and Mrs Blackett had both retired early. Matthew, after murmuring his goodbyes to the ladies (only Kate had shed a tear at parting from the Human Bean), had made himself scarce. Joan and Nigel had wandered into the garden and were sitting by the swimming pool watching the moon sliding gently this way and that on its dark skin.

Walter was pondering the question of palm-oil as he had done time and again in recent weeks. Palm-oil was plainly a business for the future. It was also, all too plainly, one in which he had allowed Blackett and Webb to get left behind. Other matters had obtruded, preventing him from taking the decisive action that was needed: old Webb's illness, the war, worries about young Webb's holdings in the company … and before all that there had been the Depression and its aftermath, the struggle for a Restriction Scheme and heaven knew what else. But while he had been hesitating what had happened? Guthries had been going from strength to strength with their new oil bulking company. Even the French had been at it, with Socfin (La Société Financière des Caoutchoucs) building a bulk shipment plant at Port Swettenham. Why, he had heard that Guthries now had twenty thousand acres under oil palms! To make the matter more galling, it seemed that Malayan palm-oil was considered superior to West African. One day, for all Walter knew, it might beacome as important as rubber … or more so, if synthetic rubber developed. Then where would Blackett and Webb be?

Walter had been aware of all this for years, of course. It was useless to pretend otherwise. Younger, he

might have taken the plunge, built a modern oil mill and bulk shipment plant, negotiated for estates. It was absurd to think you could compete by shipping the stuff in wooden barrels in this day and age; it would take a considerable investment. It was the sort of venture that might be undertaken, perhaps, by a firm as large as Blackett's and Langfield's combined. Walter was profoundly depressed by the thought that a good fifteen years had gone by since Guthries had gone heavily into palm-oil. In that time he had done nothing! There was one consolation, at least as far as Socfin were concerned: Port Swettenham must be in Japanese hands by now.

Dr Brownley stood up to take his leave, murmuring that one of these days Walter must…

'Yes, yes,' muttered Walter impatiently, anxious for the Doctor to leave without delay. There was a matter he wanted to discuss with Solomon Langfield. Discountenanced by the briskness of Walter's goodbyes, the Doctor retreated. Walter was left alone in the semi-darkness of the verandah with his old rival of many years.

'Well, Solomon,' he began cautiously, 'these are troubled times for Singapore and I have a feeling that things will never again be quite the way they used to be in the old days.' A grunt of assent came from the figure in the cane chair beside him. Encouraged, Walter went on: 'Soon it will be time for another generation to take over from us the building of this Colony. But still, I think we've done our bit, people like you and me … and my sorely missed partner, Webb, of course.' He added as an afterthought: '… And poor old Bowser, too, we mustn't forget him.' Walter considered it generous of himself to include the incompetent, drunken Bowser and the crafty, even criminal Langfield among the founders of modern Singapore. All the same, he waited rather anxiously for Solomon's response which, when it came, was another grunt, somewhat non-committal this time. On the darkened verandah Walter could see little but the glow of his companion's cigar tip on the arm of his chair and a faint gleam of moonlight on the bald pate as it curved up to the long sagacious forehead where preposterous eyebrows rose like puffs of steam.

'I must say that it reassures me when I think that our work here will be in good hands when our youngsters take over from us. Mind you, my boy, Monty, has never been as interested in the business as I would have hoped … not his line but, well, fair enough, we all have our rôle to play and he's more of … I suppose you'd say he was more of an academic turn of mind,' proceeded Walter, fumbling rather. 'But my girl, Joan, now, she's as hard-headed as they come and one day she'll make a fine businesswoman. Why, she could buy and sell her old papa already!'

A faint snicker greeted this remark and Walter paused, disconcerted. Had he imagined a sarcastic note to it, as if one were to say: 'Well, *that* wouldn't be difficult!'

'Yes,' he continued, summing up, 'I don't think we need worry about those who come after.' And he added, almost as an afterthought: 'Young Nigel, he's a fine lad, too. I like the cut of his jib, I must say. Too bad there aren't more like him coming out East these days … Someone at the Club the other day, just forget who it was, said to me: "Look here, Blackett, why don't you and Langfield marry that young pair off? That'd give Guthries and Sime Darby something to think about! And by Jove, you know, he wasn't far wide of the mark either when you come to think about it.'

A faint, enigmatic chortle greeted this last observation, followed by silence.

'Well, Solomon,' Walter ventured presently. 'What would you think of such an arrangement if the interested parties liked the sound of it? There need be no great changes on the business side during our lifetime, of course. Frankly, I think we could both do a lot worse. What d'you think?'

Now at last, after being immobile for so long that it might have been taken merely for a piece of furniture, the passive silhouette beside Walter began to move, to struggle to its feet with a creaking and shrieking of bamboo, accompanied by a most peculiar gasping sound which it took him a little time to recognize as laughter. At length, however, the wheezing and gasping died away. By now Langfield was on his feet in front of Walter and bobbing up and down. Again it took Walter a few moments before he realized what the dimly perceived figure was doing. Then it was suddenly clear: the old codger was executing an insulting little caper in front of him.

'So you're having trouble getting rid of her, are you, Blackett?' he crowed. 'Well, no son of mine would look at her in a hundred years. Never! Not if you gave him half Singapore with her! Ah, that's a good one … That's the best I've heard for years … Ha! ha! … Your daughter and my son! He wouldn't look at her! Ha!' Solomon had paused in the half-open door which led back into the house and his old monkey's face, illuminated by a glow from within, was twisted with hideous glee. 'Good night, Blackett. Why, that's the best I've heard for years! You've made my day.'

The door slammed. Walter was left alone on the verandah but he could still hear Langfield's footsteps departing down the corridor. Then, from somewhere deep inside the house, faintly, a querulous voice cried out: 'He wouldn't touch the bitch! Never! Never!' A burst of frenzied laughter and all was quiet.

Not far away, in another and less elegant part of the city, Matthew was sitting on Vera's bed, apparently about to begin his second meal of the evening. For the past week Vera had issued repeated promises that she would one day cook him a meal, ignoring his protests that he was managing perfectly well for food already. Now here was the promised meal, balanced on his lap, and there seemed to be no option but to go ahead and eat it. He peered at what lay on the plate which was by no means easy to identify in the dim light of the oil-lamp. He proded it suspiciously. 'What is it?'

‘Baked beans.’

‘I can see they’re baked beans. But what are these two lumps of slippery stuff?’

‘Chicken blood … a Chinese delicacy. Taste. You’ll like it very much, Matthew, I know.’

‘And these two other lumps covered in sauce?’

‘They are other Chinese delicacy … They are white mice, poached Chinese-style. Taste. They are very good.’

‘I’m not frightfully hungry, as a matter of fact. I’ve had one meal already this evening … But I’m really looking forward to tasting all this,’ he added hastily as Vera looked hurt, ‘even if I don’t quite manage to finish it all.’ He captured a baked bean with his chopsticks and nibbled it cautiously.

‘Oh, Matthew, you don’t think I am a good cook, do you?’

‘Of course I do,’ protested Matthew, and in a fit of bravado lifted one of the white mice to his lips and began to gnaw at it, making appreciative sounds. He found that it did not taste too bad, but would have liked to have known which end of the mouse he was eating.

‘You think Miss Blackett is better cook than I,’ Vera said accusingly. ‘I don’t know how you can touch a European woman like Miss Blackett, they sweat so much. It is something horrible!’

‘But…’

‘Yes, you prefer making love-making to Miss Blackett even though she sweats something horrible.’

‘Don’t be silly. You say that just because I’m not hungry when you cook me a meal! You know I only like to be with you. Come and sit beside me.’ Putting the plate down, he murmured : ‘I’ll finish the rest later.’

‘I know you think I am not a good cook but my mother could not teach me. Always she was used to servants here, servants there, because she was a princess. It is because my family has blue blood that I do not know how to cook.’

‘But Vera, I think …’

She had come to sit beside him and now put her hand over his mouth and said: ‘If we stay together I’ll learn to be a good cook so that you can invite your friends and we will have a nice time.’

‘I don’t have any friends, except Major Archer and Dupigny … and, of course, Jim Ehrendorf, but I don’t know where he is.’ He looked at his watch. ‘Soon I shall have to be going, Vera. I’m expected on duty tonight.’

‘Not just yet. Lie here with me a little while. “With so much quarrelling and so few kisses, how long do you think our love can last?” That is what it says in the Chinese song translated into English by Mr Waley. Shall I read you another verse? But first take off your clothes and lie down beside me.’

‘Mrs Blackett and Kate are leaving for Australia tomorrow … and I hear that lots of other women are leaving, too. Tomorrow we must try to arrange for you to leave, too. It isn’t safe for you to stay in Singapore with the Japanese so close.’

All night I could not sleep
Because of the moonlight on my bed.
I kept hearing a voice calling;
Out of nowhere, Nothing answered ‘yes’.

Matthew lay there inert, listening to the faint sounds which came from the other cubicles in the tenement and from outside in the street, above all, like the very rhythm of poverty and despair, that weary, tubercular coughing which never ceased. ‘Tomorrow, d’you hear me?’

I will carry my coat and not put on my belt;
With unpainted eyebrows I will stand at the front window.
My tiresome petticoat keeps on flapping about;
If it opens a little, I shall blame the spring wind.

‘What will become of us?’ Matthew wondered, thinking how vulnerable they both were, lying there in the stifling cubicle and breathing that strange smell that hung everywhere in Chinatown, that odour of drains and burnings rags. And how strange it was that someone should have made up these verses, which he found extraordinarily moving, hundreds of years ago and yet they sounded as new and fresh as if they had been composed by someone who had been here in this cubicle only a moment earlier. And that this person should have belonged to a quite different culture from his own made it seem even more moving. And slowly a peculiar feeling stole over Matthew, almost like a premonition of disaster. All the different matters, both in his own personal life and outside it, which had preoccupied him in the past few weeks and even years, his relationship with his father and the history of Blackett and Webb, the time he had spent in Oxford and in Geneva, his friendship with Ehrendorf and with Vera and with the Major, his arguments about the League and even the one about colonial policy which he had had earlier in the evening with Nigel, and yes even his saying goodbye to dear little Kate … all these things now seemed to cling together, to belong to each other and to have a direction and an impetus towards destruction which it was impossible to resist.

I heard my love was going to Yang-chou

And went with him as far as Ch'u-shan.
For a moment when you held me fast in your outstretched arms
I thought the river stood still and did not flow.

'Vera, listen to me. We must make arrangements for you to leave, and no later than tomorrow.'

53

AIR-RAIDS: TWO POINTS FOR THE PUBLIC

1 You *must not* crowd to the place where a bomb has dropped. The enemy may come back and machine-gun you. Moreover, crowds interfere with the Passive Defence Services.

2 In air-raids people are sometimes suffocated by dust and plaster. You can lessen this danger by covering your mouth and nose with a wet handkerchief.

In the past few days the Major, assisted by Matthew, Dupigny, Nigel Langfield and such of the other volunteer firemen who were at hand, had made an effort to convert the Mayfair into a more efficient fire station. Matthew's former office had become a dormitory where those on night-duty might rest between calls: half a dozen *charpoys* had been put against the walls and an extra fan installed. The room next to it, meanwhile, had been converted into a watch-room where the. Major presided over the telephone and maps of Singapore. There was no way of protecting such a building adequately against bombs: constructed of wood on brick piles even the blast from a near miss would be likely to demolish it. Nevertheless, the two rooms most in use had been protected with an outer layer of sandbags while work on an air-raid shelter of sorts had begun in the compound where the ground rose conveniently in a slope up to the road at the rear. Into this slope a trench was dug, just long enough to accommodate the estimated maximum number of people likely to be found at the Mayfair at any one moment; it was then roofed over with timber and corrugated-iron sheets which the Major, without consulting Walter, commandeered from the construction of the floats in the nutmeg grove.

As the days went by, however, the shelter had to be dug further and further into the slope, on account of the Mayfair's steadily increasing population of volunteer firemen, of refugees from up-country who could find no other lodging, and of transients of one kind and another. Among the new arrivals in the early days of the New Year there were a number who did not stay more than a night, military people *en route* from one posting to another and very often with a bottle of whisky or gin in their trappings, anxious to celebrate a few hours of freedom before plunging back into the struggle. At such times the Mayfair took on a gay, even uproarious atmosphere: the piano was trundled up from the recreation hut, someone was found to hammer away at it and songs were bellowed out into the compound from the verandah where, though it was dark, at least the revellers could get a breath of air. Other people came and went according to a mysterious time-table of their own, sleeping on camp-beds in odd corners or even on the floor, perhaps not speaking to anyone but merely dropping in to use the lavatory, for the Mayfair, though dilapidated in certain respects, had one that flushed, a great luxury in Singapore.

With refugees pouring back in increasing numbers on to Singapore Island you saw new faces wherever you went, and even some people who had already been living in the city had adapted themselves to a new, nomadic sort of life. Thus, one day when the Major returned from the compound where he had been training some new recruits in a 'dry drill', he was not particularly surprised to find on the verandah an elderly gentleman who had not been there before. This old fellow, comfortably installed and drinking a cup of tea he had ordered from Cheong, gave no explanation of his presence but he did introduce himself in the course of the conversation. His name was Captain John Brown and he was eighty years of age, he informed the Major in the confident tone of a man accustomed to command. He had spent the greater part of his life in Eastern waters, fool that he was for he hated every inch, every last shoal and channel of 'em … As a result his health was ruined and as for savings, ha! If the Major saw his bank balance he would be astonished, yes, flabbergasted that this was all a man had been able to put by for his old age after sixty-five years at sea. 'My health has been ruined by the climate out here, Archer, and that's a fact.'

The Major, inspecting Captain Brown, could not help thinking that he looked remarkably hale, considering his age. He was a wiry little man with unusually large ears. His thin neck and prominent Adam's apple were encircled by a collar several times too big for them and altogether his physical presence was too slight to explain the air of authority which clung to him. It emerged that the Captain had been living in a hostel for mariners near the docks; the air-raids on the docks had obliged him to leave and push further inland, a mile or two, as far as Tanglin. But he evidently had another billet as well as the Mayfair for after a day or two of holding forth to the young firemen about the hard knocks which life in the East had dealt him and adjudicating any other matters which came up in his presence he disappeared again, picking up his bag and slinging it over his shoulder as if he were a twenty-year-old. For three or four days there was no sign of him, but then the Major passed Cheong hastening towards the verandah with a sandwich and a cup of tea, peremptorily ordered by Captain Brown, and there he was, comfortably installed in his favourite chair once again.

'How are you, sir?' asked the Major, pleased to see him back.

'Very ill,' retorted the Captain grimly, and for some time held forth fluently on the state of his health,

which did not prevent him bolting his sandwich in the meantime. For the better part of a week Captain Brown was in residence and whether he was on the verandah or in the outer office, which now served as the watch-room for the AFS unit, everything grew ship-shape around him; he could not abide slackness or muddle and he had strong opinions on how matters should be conducted. Indeed, if the Major had not at last spoken out bluntly he would have assumed command of the fire-service.

The Human Condition, with an instinct which drew him magnetically to pay homage to the most powerful source of authority within range, invariably installed himself beneath the Captain's chair whenever he was in residence. 'I really must have that poor animal destroyed,' mused the Major. But the Major had a great deal to do without having to deal with dogs as well. Although Captain Brown soon proved to be a considerable help in the administration of the AFS unit, the Major now had the added problem of refugees from the more dangerous parts of Singapore.

One day, for example, when he was going about his business as usual he received an urgent instruction to call on Mr Smith of the Chinese Protectorate. The Major remembered Smith as the rather supercilious young man who had summoned him once before, to warn him of the dangers of Communism and wondered whether he was to be given a further homily on the subject. But this time Smith, with his hair still flickering disconcertingly about his ears and showing no sign of having moved an inch in the weeks that had passed since the Major had last seen him, wanted to know how many vacant rooms there were at the Mayfair Building. The Major had no difficulty in answering that question.

'None.' And he explained about his refugees.

'How many rooms then which are not vacant?'

The Major told him.

'Excellent. Since these other lodgers you mention are not official evacuees you will be able to turn them out in favour of the girls we are going to send you from the Poh Leung Kuk.'

'From *where?*'

'From the Chinese Girls' Home.'

'But that's impossible. We can't turn people out when they have nowhere to go!'

'They'll find somewhere, Major, don't worry. Besides, it's an order. It has nothing to do with me. It's official, so there you are. Perhaps you'd like to know a little more about them?' And Smith began to explain that the Poh Leung Kuk was run by a committee of Chinese under the supervision of the Protectorate. There had been such an importing of young girls into the Colony to act as prostitutes, particularly before the brothels had been closed down in 1930, that it had been necessary to find a suitable institution to house them. Girls arriving from China were taken to an inspection depot and only released to genuine relatives or employers. Any employers with dubious credentials were obliged to post a bond for a sum of money that the girl in question would not be disposed of to someone else or made to work as a prostitute. Other girls found themselves in the home as a result of police raids on illicit establishments. Unfortunately, since the Poh Leung Kuk was situated in a vulnerable part of Singapore in buildings near Outram Road (next to the prison on one side and near the Teck Lee Ice Works on the other), it had been found necessary to disperse the inmates where possible. The Major had been specially selected as a man of probity to give temporary shelter to half a dozen of these girls.

'Oh, and one more thing, Major. You'll probably find that some, if not all, of your girls are on the "marriage list". I suppose you don't know the procedure in that eventuality …'

'No, I don't, and frankly …'

'No need to take that tone here, Major. You don't seem to realize that there's a war on and that we must improvise as best we can. Now, about the "marriage list" …'

In due course the Major, accompanied for moral support by Dupigny, had driven over to the Poh Leung Kuk in one of the Blackett and Webb vans to take delivery of the half-dozen girls who had been assigned to the Mayfair. He found himself waiting in a sort of yard aware that from the windows round about him a multitude of eyes were appraising him. After a while, the official to whom he had explained his business returned, saying rather nervously: 'They'll be out in a moment, I think.' He stood in silence for a moment, then said brightly: 'None of yours have any venereal problems, as far as we know.' The Major cleared his throat gloomily, but said nothing. 'Ah, here they come now.'

'But there were supposed only to be half a dozen. Here there are twice as many!'

'That was only an estimate …'

'What d'you think, François? They *look* well-behaved. Can we manage so many? I suppose they could help Cheong with the cooking and household chores …' The Major surveyed the row of neatly dressed Chinese girls who had lined up beside the van as if for inspection, each with her little bundle of belongings. They kept their eyes meekly on the ground while the two men discussed what to do. Dupigny, who could see the Major already weakening and who, moreover, was experienced in the ways of civil servants, gave it as his opinion that they should return to the Mayfair and only accept those girls whom the Protectorate succeeded in billeting on them by force.

'But François, we can't possibly leave so many of them here! How would we feel if a bomb dropped on this building tonight? We could never forgive ourselves!'

And so, with the back of the van crammed with young women, the Major and Dupigny drove back to the

Mayfair. 'I'm sure they won't be any trouble, François … what d'you think?' There was silence from Dupigny and a raised eyebrow. 'Once we've got it sorted out which of them is on the marriage list and which isn't … I mean, that's the only real problem.' Smith had explained that thanks to a shortage of women in the Colony, there was a great demand for brides from the Poh Leung Kuk among the less affluent Chinese who could not afford to find a wife in the usual manner, that is through a go-between, which could involve great expense. A man who wanted a wife, once he had given details of his circumstances, might look over the girls on the list and make his selection. The girl then would accept or reject him on the spot. He would then pay forty dollars for his bride's trousseau and undergo a medical inspection. And that was that.

'I shouldn't think there'll be many men wanting to get married in the present situation,' said the Major confidently. 'I don't think we need worry about it, François. What d'you think?' Dupigny smiled but still made no comment. From the back of the van there came one or two smothered giggles.

All the same, there was no question of the Major asking any of the refugees to leave so that he might accommodate the newcomers. He allotted the former Board Room to the girls as a dormitory, asked Cheong to make use of them for kitchen and cleaning duties and, having nominated Captain Brown to deal with any difficulties that might arise, he returned to his other preoccupations, hoping for the best.

And still, as the days went by, more refugees continued to arrive so that soon new arrivals were obliged to camp in the compound. Now the centre of the city was thronged with refugees from up-country, milling about aimlessly all day in the hot streets in the hope of coming across someone they knew who might be able to help them. Many of them were women with small children who had been separated from their menfolk in the upheaval and had no idea of how they could make contact with them again. The Major, gazing at these shattered-looking people, was appalled and angry at the inadequacy of the arrangements which had been made to cope with them. But at this late date, with the administration of the city already in chaos, what was there to be done?

There was, however, one newcomer to the Mayfair whom everyone was pleased to see. Returning early one morning from an exhausting night at the docks, Matthew saw a familiar figure sitting on the verandah chatting with Dupigny. It was Ehrendorf.

'You've got thin, Matthew,' he said with a smile, getting to his feet. 'I hardly recognize you.'

'So have you!' Matthew was taken aback to see the change that had taken place in his friend's appearance in the few weeks since he had last seen him. Ehrendorf's handsome face was deeply lined and shrunk, as if he were suddenly ten years older. His cheekbones stood out sharply and grim little brackets which Matthew had never noticed before now enclosed the corners of his mouth; as he was speaking his eyes kept wandering from Matthew's face, as if he were trying to estimate, by the sound of the ack-ack batteries, the course of the raid which at that moment was taking place to the south.

Ehrendorf's voice was firm, however, as he explained that he had been ill with dysentery in Kuala Lumpur. Later he had been to Kuantan on the east coast, then back to Kuala Lumpur to find that it was being evacuated. He had no specific idea of how the campaign was progressing but it was clear that it was going badly. The roads throughout Johore were jammed with reinforcements and supplies going in one direction and refugees going, or attempting to go, in the other. It had taken him many hours to get through the traffic by car to Singapore and there was a danger of the whole line of communication seizing up. It was already a sitting target during daylight hours for Japanese bombers. He had heard one piece of good news, though. Last Tuesday it had rained providentially and a convoy of reinforcements had managed to sneak in, thanks to the bad weather, without being taken to bits by the bombers which now prowled the sea approaches to Singapore. Provided there was some way of getting the new men and equipment into the line quickly enough … Ehrendorf shrugged.

'I shall probably be going back to the States in a few days if I can get transport.'

'In the meantime, you can stay here and lend a hand at the pumps.' Noticing Ehrendorf hesitate he added: 'You haven't seen Joan, I suppose? Mrs Blackett and Kate have left for Australia. Joan's still here, I believe, but I haven't seen her recently. Come on, grab your kit and I'll show you the few inches that are your ration of floorboards. We'll soon make a fireman of you.'

54

LEARN TO DANCE AND DROWN YOUR WORRIES IN CABARETS!
Success guaranteed to anyone after two and a half hours
private coaching at the
Modern Dancing School
5A Ann Siang Hill
(the road is diagonally opposite to the Hindu Temple
of South Bridge Road).

Straits Times, 16 Jan 1942

PROGRAMME FOR SUNDAY, 18 JAN, 1942,
at the Sea View Hotel popular concert
11 a.m. to 1 p.m. by Reller's band

1	Overture	The Beautiful Helena	Offenbach
2	Waltz	Wine, Women & Song	Strauss
3	Fantasia	Faust	Gounod
4	Selection	Showboat	Kern
5	Rhapsody	Slavonic Rhapsody	Friedman
6	Selection	No, No, Nanette	Youman
7	Medley	Somers Scottish Medley	Rijf
8	Selection	Tommy's Tunes	Pecher

Tiffin special Curry served from 12.30–2.30 p.m.

MR SOLOMON R. LANGFIELD,
PEACEFULLY IN HIS SIXTY-THIRD YEAR.
NO FLOWERS PLEASE.

The death was announced today of Mr Solomon Langfield, co-founder of Langfield and Bowser Ltd and a familiar figure in Singapore business circles for many years. Mr Walter Blackett, paying tribute, said that although not the first in the field Mr Langfield's family firm had made a contribution.

So troubled were the times that for the general public the passing of old Solomon Langfield, who surprisingly had turned out not to be quite as old as everyone had thought, took place with scarcely a murmur. There were none of the official manifestations of grief which had marked old Mr Webb's departure, for example, none of the letters of regret from the Governor nor the flying of flags at half-mast over buildings frequented by rubber dealers, bankers and merchants. At best a few of his old colleagues from Club or committee found their way to the Blacketts' residence to pay their last respects and offer condolences to young Nigel Langfield on his bereavement. If there were not even as many of these as one might have hoped, considering the long and devoted service which Solomon Langfield had bestowed unstintingly on the Colony in a number of different fields of endeavour, it was partly because in these troubled times everyone had difficulties of his own. It was partly, too, because some of those who were among the first to make the sad pilgrimage to take leave of their friend, reported back that Walter was inclined to be moody and odd in his behaviour, feigning not to know why they had come and then, when they had explained, giving the impression that their journey had been a waste of time and that they were disturbing his peace unnecessarily for such a trivial matter. However, with a shrug of his shoulders he would direct them to the room where the body had been laid out (refrigerated fortunately) awaiting mortuary attentions.

No doubt Walter's moody behaviour would have seemed more explicable to the friends of the deceased if they had known the extent of his disappointment over Solomon Langfield's rejection of the match he had proposed between their respective children. Walter was bitter about this. It had been such a good idea. When you are in a pickle as complicated as that which Walter considered himself to be in, with a partner in your company you cannot depend upon, with a daughter to marry off, and vast stocks of rubber to ship, it could only be expected that the rejection of a single elegant solution to these disparate problems would come as a blow. Add to that old Solomon Langfield's insulting behaviour and you have enough to make blood bubble in the veins.

A great deal of thought must be given to your daughter's marriage. Otherwise she will simply slink off like a cat on a dark night and get herself fertilized under a bush by God knows whom! Yes, even a sensible daughter will, there's no trusting them, particularly these days … Or to put it another way, there are no sensible daughters. Not even with a girl like Joan, who had her head screwed on more tightly than most, could you be sure that you would not wake up one morning to find her entangled with some worthless adventurer. Now, although Walter was confident that sooner or later the present difficulties with the Japanese would be overcome and life in Singapore would return to normal, it was increasingly obvious to him that for some time to come the Singapore community would be scattered to the winds. Finding herself in a different environment, in Australia, say, or India, was there not a danger that Joan would lose the sensible perspective she had acquired in Singapore? Yes, there was, and that was why Walter felt he must see Joan married before she left Singapore. The last thing Walter wanted was to find her captivated by some mustachioed flight-lieutenant who happened to catch her fancy because he was serving his country so heroically.

The morning after Langfield had rejected his proposal so impudently Walter had discussed the matter with Joan. 'The old brute was against the idea,' he had explained grimly, 'and even if Nigel was so besotted about you that he was willing to go ahead without the old man's permission, it still wouldn't do any good because if I know Solomon he'd just cut off the funds. Then we'd be stuck with Nigel but with none of the Langfield

business which would be the worst possible solution.' Yes, it had begun to seem to Walter that he had left this question of marrying off his daughter until too late. Fate, however, had then taken a hand.

When, in due course, Abdul came to inform Walter, first that *Tuan* Langfield had not risen for breakfast, then that *Tuan* Langfield would not be rising again on this earth, Walter had merely said to himself: 'What a blessed nuisance! Trust that old codger to make a nuisance of himself!' But presently it did occur to him that provided Solomon had not discussed the matter with his son, his death might not be such a nuisance after all. Joan was inclined to share his opinion.

Walter was astonished to see the effect that the news of his father's death had on Nigel. The young man seemed positively afflicted to hear of it; he was visibly on the verge of breaking down. Walter inspected him with curiosity, marvelling at the resources of human nature that could inspire, even for such as Solomon Langfield, an affection so deep. But there was the evidence: Nigel sat before him with his head in his hands, overcome. Such grief could only be respected.

Walter gave Joan a nod and a wink and she advanced to place a comforting hand on the young man's shoulder. Walter himself retired then to brood in his dressing-room. He believed he had thought of a way to bring solace to Nigel in his hour of loss. Thus, later in the morning when Nigel had regained control of himself, Walter summoned him and said: 'My boy, I know how you must be feeling. I won't beat about the bush. Your father and I had our ups and downs but we always respected each other. When you get down to it, you know, we were very much alike in many ways. Well, I hesitate to tell you what I'm going to tell you because I know that he did not want you to be influenced in any way. I think that poor Solomon may have had some intimation that the end was not far away because the other evening, while we were chatting together about old times and the fun we'd had as youngsters in this Colony, he happened to say how concerned he was for the future … Yes, to put it in a nutshell he told me that he would not be at all averse to seeing you settle down and start a family. "Well, Walter," he said to me, "this may come as a surprise to you, considering the ups and downs we've had in business matters, but there's only one young woman I'd like to see him married to and that's that young woman of yours, Joan." There it is, Nigel, and I was pretty surprised about it, I must say, but once I'd got to thinking about it, why … Lord, are those the wretched air-raid sirens again?'

'But Mr Blackett!' cried Nigel who in the matter of a few seconds had flushed, turned pale and was now flushing again.

'Dammit! It's only five to ten. This is becoming too much of a good thing …'

'I thought my father …'

'Well, there we are. We'll talk about it later … but of course, only if you want to. Maybe I've been speaking out of turn, maybe I should have kept mum about it: it wasn't an easy decision for me to bring it up. And mind you, I know he didn't want you to be influenced in any way and he even told me that if anything he would pretend to take a dim view of such an arrangement just so that … Ah, there go the guns! Damn these air-raids! How can we possibly get anything done? By the sound of the guns they seem to be coming our way … We'd better go to the shelter this time, I think. You go and get Joan and I'll tell the staff to get under cover …'

There was no time for further discussion. Already the bombs were beginning to fall and the thudding of the anti-aircraft guns matched the thudding of young Nigel's heart as he dashed upstairs to get Joan and bring her to the shelter which Walter had had dug beside the Orchid Garden. This time, it seemed, the Japanese bombers were not going to be content with an attack on Keppel Harbour or the Naval Base: they were setting to work on the city itself and on Tanglin in particular.

Nearby at the Mayfair those of the Major's firemen who were awake after their night's work listened wearily to the sirens. Only when the guns at Bukit Timah opened up did they make a move to take shelter. Here, as almost everywhere else on the island, it was hard to see any distance, except upwards. And so as they struggled out of the building, still red-eyed and bewildered from lack of sleep, they looked upwards … to see a densely packed wave of Japanese bombers flying at a great height and directly over Tanglin. In a moment the leading bomber would fire a burst of machine-gun fire: at this signal all the planes would drop their bombs at the same moment and there would be havoc on the ground. Meanwhile, a few hundred yards from where they stood the light ack-ack battery over the brow of the hill was blazing away quite uselessly, it seemed, for the bombers were flying well out of range.

Now the aeroplanes above, like monstrous insects, began to deposit batches of little black eggs into the sky and a fearful whistling grew in the air around the men fleeing through the flowerbeds. Soon the shelter was crammed and people flung themselves down in any hole or ditch they could find while the Major, wearing a steel helmet, bundled the girls from the Poh Leung Kuk and other latecomers into the recreation hut whose walls had been padded with rubber bales, mattresses and cushions, more as a gesture than anything else. As he did so the first bomb landed in the long-disused swimming pool sending up a great column of water which hung in the air for a moment like a block of green marble before crashing down again. Another bomb landed simultaneously in the road blowing a snowstorm of red tiles off the Mayfair's roof and out over the compound, and another in the grove of old rubber which lay between the Mayfair and the Blacketts' house. The last explosion, though some distance from both makeshift shelters, was strong enough to blow in one wall of the recreation hut, hurling those who had been huddled against it back into a jumble of cushions, mattresses and

struggling bodies: the roof, too, began to sag and utter piercing cracks. In the deep hush which followed, the telephone could be heard ringing, very faintly, in the empty bungalow. People began to extricate themselves from the jumble on the floor of the recreation hut. Nobody seemed to be badly hurt.

Abruptly there was a roar overhead and everyone ducked. 'It's one of the RAF buses!' someone shouted as a Hurricane vanished over the tree tops. A ragged cheer went up. The telephone was still ringing: it seemed a miracle that the wires had not been brought down in the bombing. The Major ran towards the bungalow to answer it. He had to swing himself up by the verandah rail because the wooden steps had been carried away by the blast from the bomb which had fallen in the road and now sagged in a drunken concertina some yards from the building. As he had expected they were being called to a fire: houses and a timber yard between River Valley Road and the river had been set alight.

Shortly afterwards a strange cavalcade was to be seen setting out from the Mayfair. In the lead came the Major's Lagonda towing a trailer-pump, followed by Mr Wu's Buick crammed with passengers. Next came two Blackett and Webb vans commandeered from the nutmeg grove by the Major and it was these which lent the Mayfair unit its air of rather desperate carnival, for there had been no time to unbolt the bizarre wooden super-structure which had been fitted on top of them; besides, it might give added protection from shrapnel. The first van, towing a second, newly acquired trailer-pump, still carried the gigantic facsimilies of red and blue Straits dollar bills, complete with slant-eyed portrait of the King. From the other van eight long arms painted dark brown, light brown, yellow and white, each pair supplied with a papier mâché head, emerged symbolically from the jaws of Poverty; since these arms, which were enormously long and stretched forward over the cabin of the van, were supposed to be reaching for Prosperity, it had been collectively decided that the van displaying the dollar bills should go first. Otherwise, as Dupigny remarked, it might almost look as if dollar bills were chasing the representatives of the four races and that they, arms outstretched, were fleeing in terror.

As they emerged on to Orchard Road they saw for the first time the extent of the havoc caused by the air-raid. A stick of high-explosive bombs had fallen along the upper reaches beginning near the junction with Tanglin Road and neatly distributing themselves, two on one side, three on the other, reducing a number of buildings to rubble, bringing down overhead cables and smashing shop windows so that the pavements of the covered ways glittered with a frosting of glass. The way into Paterson Road was blocked by a number of blazing vehicles which had been hurled across the road by the blast; a lorry lay upside down, its wheels in the air; everywhere people scrabbled desperately in the rubble searching for survivors. A greyish-white cloud of dust muted the blaze of the burning vehicles and turned the people struggling in the road into figures from a winter scene.

The Major continued down Orchard Road hoping to approach River Valley Road from the other direction; he looked back once or twice to make sure that the others were following. Behind the two vans a motor-cycle brought up the rear of the column, carrying Turner, formerly the manager of the Johore estate, but now obliged by military preparations across the Causeway to return to Singapore, and a Chinese friend of Mr Wu's whose name was Kee, a strong and taciturn individual, extremely courageous.

They had to proceed carefully here, sounding their horns on account of the people, many of them apparently still dazed, some wandering about aimlessly, others laying out the dead and wounded at the side of the road. Once they had to stop while an abandoned vehicle was dragged out of their path; then they came upon an oil-tanker that had collided with a tree but by a miracle had not caught fire. Not far away the Cold Storage had had a near miss and badly shaken shoppers were being helped from the building. Near the vegetable and fruit market next door a block of flats was on fire. A Sikh traffic policeman, still incongruously wearing the basketwork wings that gave him the appearance of a dragon-fly, waved his arms vigorously, trying to direct the Major towards the burning flats. But the Major would not be directed: he had his own fire to go to. As they passed by he saw the policeman sink to his knees and then fold up with his forehead on the sticky tar surface of the road, evidently overcome by shock or concussion: one of his basket wings had been neatly broken in the middle and bent back behind the shoulderblade. A moment later and he had been left behind in the swirling dust and smoke, motionless as a dying insect in the road.

By the time they reached the timber yard two Chinese AFS units were already at work under a detachment from the Central Fire Station but it was clear that there was no chance of saving either the yard itself or the adjoining saw-mills, both of which were well alight. To make matters worse a stiff breeze was blowing from the north-east in the direction of a group of slum tenements standing a little way back from the river: an attempt was being made to arrest the wall of flame advancing towards them.

When the suction hose had been dropped in the river and the delivery hose had been laid out the pumps were started up: the Major and Ehrendorf went ahead with one branch, Mr Wu and Turner with the other. Kee, who was a mechanic, had taken charge of both pumps, assisted by Captain Brown, while Matthew, Cheong, Dupigny and the others ran back and forth as the branches advanced, laying out extra lengths, signalling to the pumps, uncoupling and coupling again, dizzy and breathless with heat. His head spinning, Matthew watched the jets from half a dozen branches curving towards the fire but nevertheless it grew and grew. Flames were now rising over half an acre of piled-up timber and roaring a hundred feet into the air and the water seemed to evaporate before it had time to touch any part of it. Once, when he was accidently splashed by water from another branch on his way to relieve the Major, who was lurching drunkenly and

seemed about to fall, Matthew gave an involuntary cry of pain: the water was scalding.

Now the fire, like some inadequately chained-up oriental demon, was roaring and raging on his left, occasionally making sudden darts forward as if to seize him by the leg and drag him back to its lair. Behind him was the river; on his right was a wooden fence and, beyond that, the tenements whose windows he could see were packed with round Chinese heads, like oranges in a box, watching the fire as if it were no concern of theirs. 'Why doesn't someone tell them to hop it?' he shouted at Ehrendorf beside him, but Ehrendorf was too bemused by the heat to reply.

Beside this ocean of flame hours passed in a dream. Every so often the men holding the branch were relieved and led back to splash themselves with the stinking water from the river. Again and again Matthew was scalded with water from another branch, but now he could hardly feel it. One moment he would be drenched from head to foot, the next his clothes would be dry and stiff on his body again.

Suddenly Matthew realized that this fire had a personality of its own. It was not just a fire, in fact, it was a living creature. He tried to explain this to Ehrendorf who was again beside him, holding on like himself to the same struggling branch: he gabbled away laughing at his insight but could not get Ehrendorf to comprehend. But it was so obvious! Not only did this fire have its own delightful fragrance (like sandalwood), it also had a restless and cunning disposition, constantly sending out rivulets of flame like outstretched claws to surround and seize the men fighting it and squeeze them to its fiery heart. But Ehrendorf, on whose forehead a large white blister had appeared, could only shake his head and mumble … meanwhile, the blister grew and presently burst and fluid ran down his face but dried instantly, like a trail of tears on his cheeks. These claws of flame which stretched out from the fire, Matthew noticed, very often overran the lengths of bulging hose that lay between the river and the fire and, presently, on one of his stumbling journeys back and forth, he saw that the canvas skin of the hose had already been eaten so thin by the fire that he could see the water coursing through, as if these were semi-transparent veins pulsing in the direction of the fire to supply it with nourishment. But what they were really trying to do was not to nourish it but to poison it. The fire chuckled and crackled cheerfully at this, and said: 'You won't poison *me* so quickly. You'd better watch out for your*self* !'

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There was something odd about that fire, Matthew found. It hypnotized him. And not only him but everyone else round about. There was another air-raid before the end of the morning, but this time nobody paid it the least attention. The fact that somewhere above the smoke and heat some aeroplanes were dropping bombs seemed, beside that monstrous fire, altogether trivial.

The hours wore on without any appreciable change, except that the heat from the fire seemed to grow more intense. Early in the afternoon another AFS unit arrived and, without a word to anyone, they dropped their hoses into the river and set to work. This new team displayed even greater human variety than the Major's: if you looked at them closely you could see that it included Indians, Malays, Chinese, Europeans and even an African who spoke only French. But these men had been to another fire and their hands and faces were already so blackened and blistered that it had become difficult to tell them apart. They knew what they were about, though, and positioned their branches so that they could control and repulse the restless claws of fire that continually threatened to encircle the Major's men.

Matthew now found that he was present at the fire merely in excerpts with long blank intervals in between: one moment he would be holding the branch with someone else and trying to shield himself from the intense heat, the next he would be slumped on the river bank trying to explain to Ehrendorf how simple it would be for human beings to use co-operation instead of self-interest as the basis of all their behaviour. 'So many people already do!' he exclaimed, but Ehrendorf, who was not as accustomed to fire-fighting as Matthew, looked too distressed to reply. If you looked at teachers and nurses and all sorts of ordinary people, to whom, incidentally, society granted a rather reluctant and condescending respect, there were already many people whose greatest ambition was the welfare of others! Why should this not be extended to every walk of life? Ah, just you wait a moment, he protested, for Ehrendorf was opening and closing his mouth like a goldfish, I know that you want to say that such people, too, are motivated by self-interest but that they get their satisfaction in a different way. That is merely a psychological quibble! There's all the difference in the world between someone who gets his satisfaction from helping others instead of helping himself! Can you imagine how tremendous life would be? Look at all these men at the fire: they'd do anything for each other, though some of them don't even speak the same bloody language! But perhaps Matthew, instead of saying all this, had merely thought it, because when Ehrendorf at last managed to reply, his words did not seem to make any sense.

Ehrendorf, in case he should not survive, was urgently trying to pass on to Matthew his great discovery; Ehrendorf's Second Law! That everything in human affairs is slightly worse at any given moment than at any preceding moment. It was very important that this should be more widely known …

'Say it again.'

Ehrendorf did so.

'What? But it's not true!'

'Yes it is, if you think about it.'

'Well, let me see … Certainly things seem to be getting worse for us in Singapore, but not for the Japanese.'

'Yes, they are getting worse for the Japanese. It only *seems* that they're not. Because things keep happening which don't do anybody any good!'

'Yes, but still there are lots of things …' Before Matthew could finish what he was saying, however, he found himself back at the fire and feeling dreadfully exhausted. He inspected the person beside him, planning to give him a piece of his mind if it turned out to Ehrendorf. It was ridiculous that a man of his intelligence and culture should not be able to see how important it was that a vast, universal change of heart should take place. It was the only answer.

'You might just as well expect stockbrokers to be ready to die for the Stock Exchange,' chuckled the fire, trying to grasp his ankle with a fiery talon.

The man standing beside him, however, turned out to be not Ehrendorf but Dupigny. Dupigny's normally pallid face had been scorched an angry red by the heat and his hair, cut to about the height of a toothbrush where it flourished most stiffly on the back and sides of his head, appeared to be smouldering. He was about to ask for an explanation of Dupigny's presence when, pausing to blink his sore eyes, he suffered another irritating time slip and was once more holding the branch, but this time with a Chinese on whose face white blisters had risen where the skin covered bone. His face had become unrecognizable but it might have been Kee. Matthew had an urge to finger his own blisters which were becoming extremely painful, but he was afraid that if he removed one hand from the branch he would be too weak to hold it … it would wrestle him to the ground and flail-out his brains.

From the fire there now came a series of dull reports, as of internal organs swelling and exploding. 'Paint chop!' howled the Chinese beside him, pointing to the depths of the fire where the skeleton of a fiercely burning hut could still be seen. It dissolved as Matthew watched, shielding his eyes. 'What about the tenements?' he asked, unexpectedly finding himself back in reality again. The tenements were still there, certainly, and so was the wooden fence, but the round Chinese heads had departed from the windows. Evidently someone had at last thought of evacuating them, which was just as well because the fire was still lapping in that direction.

Towards the end of the afternoon half a dozen huge cranes which had been towering over the fire in a semi-circle on its south-western fringe began to waver; then, one by one, they slowly buckled, toppling into the fire and sending up great fountains of sparks and burning debris which started fresh fires all around as they fell to earth again; these new fires threatened once more to cut off the men wielding the branches. The Major had become very concerned about the safety of his men and decided on a roll-call: even this was not easy to effect in the dense smoke and ever more intense heat. Finally it was completed. There was one man missing. Nobody had seen Mr Wu since he had been relieved at one of the branches some time earlier: an hour, half an hour? it was impossible to say. But just as they were deciding with dismay that Mr Wu must have been cut off by a subsidiary fire stemming from one of the fallen cranes and consumed, he suddenly reappeared again, as cheerful as ever, together with a lorry loaded with Fraser and Neave's mineral waters which he had somehow commandeered, hired or hijacked … and not a moment too soon for everyone at the fire was suffering badly from dehydration. The Chinese driver of the lorry, which had evidently been on a delivery round, then volunteered to join the firemen and was promptly enrolled. Next time, the Major reflected, it would be as well to bring food and drink; it had not occurred to him that they might have to spend such a long time away from the Mayfair.

At dusk the fire grew steadily more magnificent. As the sky darkened they became aware that the air was full of drifting sparks which fell around them in a steady golden drizzle which now and again grew more heavy, so that they wondered uneasily whether their clothes might catch fire. Nevertheless, the beauty of this golden rainstorm was such that Matthew was filled with great exhilaration, no longer feeling the sting of sparks on his unprotected face and forearms but gazing about in wonder like a child.

For some time now the fire had ceased to make progress towards the tenements and it was easier in the darkness to spot new advances it tried to make before they had time to become established. But although the fire itself stopped advancing, and even fell back a little, its core in which thousands of tons of logs were being consumed, grew hotter and hotter so that even at a considerable distance it could no longer be faced and the men with the branch could only work for a few minutes at a time. In the gloom it could be seen that the drainpipes on the tenement buildings had begun to glow red-hot, standing out like blood vessels on the dark masses of the buildings. And now the wooden fence spontaneously burst into flame though the fire was nowhere near it: it blazed furiously for a minute or two, then melted away and a rich wine darkness returned.

Some time after midnight Adamson arrived, bringing two more units from another fire at the docks. He made a quick inspection, detailed the new men to hose down the tenement roofs and walls and then, after a word of encouragement to the exhausted men, returned to his own fire at the docks. Not long afterwards it was found that there were two men missing from one of the other AFS units: a frantic search for them began. One was found unconscious not far from the pumps, overcome by the heat and smoke: he was splashed with water from the river and given some lemonade from Mr Wu's lorry. Towards dawn the other man was found dead on the no man's land between the fire and the tenements where he had evidently collapsed. His scanty clothing had been burned off his back and his helmet was glowing a dull red. For some hours it was

impossible to retrieve his body and when at last this was done and someone made to grasp his arm to lift him on to a stretcher, the arm came away from the shoulder like the wing of an overcooked chicken.

The fire reached its zenith at about five o'clock in the morning and thereafter it became possible to drive it back gradually, a few feet hour after hour: the plan was to contain it and let it burn itself out. Abruptly Matthew realized that it was daylight again: standing so close to the fire he had not noticed the sky growing paler. In the darkness it had been difficult to tell the Mayfair men from the others, but in the daylight it was not much easier, so dirty and unkempt were the figures staggering drunkenly about on the uneven ground. Moreover, by now there was so much hose running between the river and the fire that when it became necessary to put in another length it was a laborious job to discover which hose belonged to the Mayfair and which to other units; the job was made even more difficult by the exhausted state that everyone was in, for by now they had been almost twenty hours at the fire and those who fell down found it hard to get up again. At one point, while engaged in a weary search to trace the correct coupling in the hoses which lay like a bundle of arteries half-buried in sodden wood shavings, Matthew stumbled against a man from one of the other companies lying on the ground. 'Thanks, mate, I'm OK,' he said when Matthew tried to help him up. 'I'll be all right in a minute.' He peered up at Matthew, recognizing him. 'You still all right then?' It was Evans, the fireman who had told him about Adamson some days earlier.

'Don't worry, I'll be OK in a minute,' Evans repeated. So Matthew went on searching for the hose he wanted. But half an hour later Evans was still lying there.

Presently Matthew, too, stumbled and fell into a pile of wood shavings: they had a pleasantly fresh scent: he lay with his cheek against them and his head spinning. He felt wonderfully contented, however, and despite his weariness, exhilarated by the sense of comradeship with the other men. After a while he made feeble efforts to get to his feet again, but the best he could do was to sit up. He sat there in the wood shavings between the fire and the river, waiting for the strength to move: the fire was quiet now, and in daylight appeared shabby and dull but it still radiated the same stupendous heat. 'This is the life I should have been living years ago,' he thought, again experiencing an extraordinary sensation of freedom and fulfilment, 'instead of which I've wasted my time with theories and empty disputes! When the war is over I shall make myself useful to someone.'

Presently Ehrendorf and Dupigny came looking for him and between them got him to his feet. The Mayfair unit was being relieved, they told him. He would do better to sleep in one of the roster beds at the Mayfair. As they left, Evans was still lying exhausted on the ground. Hardly had they passed through the shattered streets to the Mayfair when the sirens began to wail once more. Another raid, heavier even than the one on Tanglin, was just beginning on the crowded shop-houses and tenements of the Beach Road area.

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An indication of communal co-operation was provided yesterday when Indian passive defence volunteers attended to the casualties in their area … these casualties were mostly Chinese. One of the members of the Indian Youth League, Mr N. M. Marshall, was most helpful in providing a van for the removal of the casualties.

In a certain well-known hotel yesterday a bomb damaged the boys' quarters but this did not prevent patrons from having their midday meal. They went to the kitchen and helped themselves.

WORKERS, every hour counts in the battle for Singapore. Don't let the sirens stop your work. The enemy bombers may be miles away. They may never come near you. Carry on till the roof-spotters give the signal to take cover. The fighting men are counting on you. Back them up in the workshops, shipyards and offices. Every hour's work makes Singapore stronger.

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'DIFFICULT TO TAKE SINGAPORE,' SAYS JAP.

'It would be risky to expect that the capture of Singapore will be an easy task to be fulfilled in a short time,' said the spokesman of the Jap War Ministry in a broadcast speech quoted by Rome radio.

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Shopping at Robinson's during alert periods. We had roof spotters on duty throughout alert periods to give final 'take cover' alarm when danger is near. Until this warning is given we endeavour to continue normal business. Members of our staff carry on and give shoppers cheerful service. We have shelter facilities and seating accommodation in the basement for all persons who are in the building should the spotters' give the danger alarm. These arrangements have been made for the protection and convenience

of our customers, so you need have no fear regarding shopping arrangements if you are at Robinson's during an alert period.

Straits Times 21, 22, 23 January 1942

In the course of this last week of January the city underwent a final metamorphosis: the peaceful and prosperous city of Singapore which Walter remembered from his early days had already been eroded by time and change, the way all cities are. But now there came a dreadful acceleration: in the course of a few days and nights many familiar parts of the city were demolished. Bombs fell in Tanglin, interrupting his important conversation with Nigel. They were sprinkled through the grounds of Government House and fell in a dense shower on Beach Road. They peppered the docks and the airfields and Bukit Timah. They fell all around the *padang* and the Municipal Offices, shattering windows in High Street and Armenian Street beneath Fort Canning Hill, and blowing out one face of the clock in the tower of the Victoria Memorial Theatre where, in years gone by, Walter had so often gone with other parents to watch the children of the European community in Mr Buckley's Christmas pantomime. 'What was all this, anyway,' mused Walter grimly, 'but the physical evidence of all the more fundamental changes that had taken place in Singapore in the last two decades?'

Walter did not often abandon himself to abstract thought and when he did so it was a sign that he was in a state of depression. He found himself now, however, brooding on what makes up a moment of history; if you took a knife and chopped cleanly through a moment of history what would it look like in cross-section? Would it be like chopping through a leg of lamb where you see the ends of the muscles, nerves, sinews and bone of one piece matching a similar arrangement in the other? Walter thought that it would, on the whole. A moment of history would be composed of countless millions of events of varying degrees of importance, some of them independent, other associated with each other. And since all these events would have both causes and consequences they would certainly match each other where they were divided, just like the leg of lamb. But did all these events collectively have a meaning?

Most people, Walter believed, would have said 'No, they are merely random.' Perhaps sometimes, in retrospect, we may stick a label on a whole stretch of events and call it, say, 'The Age of Enlightenment' the way we might call a long hank of muscle a fillet steak, but we are simply imposing a meaning on what was, unlike the fillet steak whose cells are organized to some purpose, essentially random. Well, if that was what most people thought, Walter did not agree with them.

Certainly, it was not easy to see a common principle in the great mass of events occurring at any moment far and near. But Walter believed that that was because you were too near to them. It was like being a single gymnast in a vast stadium with several thousand other gymnasts: your movements and theirs might seem quite baffling from where you stand whereas viewed from an aeroplane, collectively you are forming letters which spell out 'God Save The King' in a pattern of delightful colours.

Well, what was this organizing principle? Walter was vague about that. He believed that each individual event in a historical moment was subtly modified by an intangible mechanism which he could only think of as 'the spirit of the time'. If a Japanese bomber had opened its bomb doors over Singapore in the year 1920 no bomb would have struck the city. Its bombs would have been lodged in the transparent roof that covered Singapore like a bubble, or bounced off it into the sea. This transparent roof was 'the spirit of those times'. The spirit of these times, unfortunately, allowed the bombs of an Asiatic nation to fall on a British city. Walter had seen the roof growing weaker even during the early thirties: such ruinous Japanese competition in the cotton trade would not have been permitted by the spirit of yet earlier times. Now the bubble no longer covered Singapore at all, or if it did, it let everything through.

Walter's own house had so far escaped damage though it had lost a few windows. in the air-raid of 20 January. But the atmosphere of the place had changed considerably since his wife and Kate had left. It was not too bad during the daytime: there was always a good deal of bustle now that he had moved his office staff up here from Collyer Quay. Once the office had closed down for the day, however, an eerie solitude descended on the house. He would sit fidgeting restlessly on the verandah or stroll on the lawn, waiting for the sirens or watching the searchlight batteries fingering the sky. Now he was back sitting on the verandah in darkness.

He was surprised that the absence of his wife and Kate should make such a difference. There were still people about. Nigel and Joan were usually somewhere mooning about the house (thank heaven, at least, that that looked like coming off successfully!). There were still the 'boys' and Abdul, though some of the kitchen staff had made themselves scarce. He occasionally saw Monty sloping in from the direction of the compound. No, what upset Walter was not the absence of people but the absence of normality. Life had taken on an aspect of nightmarish unreality. If someone had told him a year ago that on a certain date in January Solomon Langfield would be found under his roof he would have dismissed the idea as ridiculous. Yet not only was Langfield under his roof (his mortal remains, anyway) but at this very moment he was in the process of being embalmed by Dr Brownley on the dining-room table … or would have been if Dr Brownley had known better how to proceed. As it was, for the last few minutes he had been on the telephone asking a colleague for instructions. The line was not a good one and he had to shout. So Walter's melancholy reflections had been punctuated by the medical instructions which Dr Brownley howled for confirmation into the instrument. Evidently he was concerned lest too much time should have elapsed since the old fox had gone to his reward.

No wonder then if Walter felt that his grip on reality had loosened.

Embalming old Langfield at a time like this, what an idea! To embalm him at any time would have seemed to Walter an unprofitable undertaking, but with bombs raining on the city and corpses laid out everywhere on the pavements the idea of preserving the old goat was perfectly ludicrous. Yet his board of directors had demanded it 'for the sake of Langfield and Bowser Limited and its British and overseas shareholders' on whose behalf, they had explained, they were making 'this very natural gesture'.

'Very natural indeed!' grumbled Walter to himself. 'What could be more *un*natural? I should have had him stuck under the ground immediately. Mind you, with the sort of man they have on Langfield's board these days they would most likely have been out there in the graveyard at the dead of night helping the company secretary to dig him up again!'

Walter sighed, allowing his mind to wander on to the subject of graveyards … Poor old Webb must be rotted away by now, he mused. His cane chair squeaked as he shifted about in it restlessly, trying to convince himself that the best thing would be to go inside and deal with some of the paper-work which awaited him. Abruptly he became aware that two wraith-like figures were moving in the shadows beyond the swimming pool. He stirred uneasily, trying to identify them. Nigel and Joan perhaps? But they had gone inside some time ago. The white wraiths shimmered nearer, growing brighter as they left the shadows of the trees and drifted into the open. Voices now reached Walter, raised in argument, and he relaxed for these were not the ghosts of old Webb and old Langfield returning to remonstrate with him from beyond the grave, but Matthew and Ehrendorf haggling over colonial policy well on this side of it.

'If by "progress" you mean the increasing welfare of the native then I'm afraid you're going to have a job proving the beneficial effects of these public works you make such a song and dance about …' Matthew was saying: he had not forgotten his moment of illumination while sitting exhausted beside the fire at the timber-yard: he still intended to give up theorizing and devote his life to practical work of some kind. But there were one or two arguments he felt he had to finish first; besides, the mere presence of Ehrendorf, even mute, was enough to start his brain secreting theories and his tongue expressing them. As for Ehrendorf, he was peering ahead at the dark house with trepidation, half hoping, half dreading that they would bump into Joan. A moment ago he had bravely offered to accompany Matthew across the compound to see Walter about something, but he had not expected to feel quite so vulnerable.

'I suppose you're talking about railways … In our African colonies something like three-quarters of all loans raised by the colonial governments are for railways. True, they're useful for administration … but what they're mainly useful for is opening up great tracts of land to be developed as plantations by Europeans. In other words, it's done not for the natives' benefit but for ours! To which you will reply, Jim, that what benefits us, benefits them … To which I reply … "Not necessarily so!" To which you reply …'

'Wait a moment,' came Dr Brownley's voice faintly to Walter on the darkened verandah, interrupting Matthew who had been gripped by such a frenzy of abstractions that he had been obliged to commandeer both sides of the argument. 'Let me make quite sure that I've got the embalming fluid down properly … I repeat … Liquor formaldehyde, 13.5cc. Sodium borate, 5 grammes … and water to make up to 100cc. Is that correct? Yes, I see … And with what? A bicycle pump?'

'A bicycle pump!' thought Walter giddily.

Meanwhile, as a descant to Dr Brownley's rather anxious elucidations (the good doctor, though for years he had been medical officer to Langfield and Bowser Limited, had never been faced with such a problem before … And just think of it! The Chairman himself! A heavy responsibility indeed!) there came Ehrendorf's reasonable tones, gently chiding Matthew for being selective in his view of railways in the colonies, for conveniently forgetting their positive aspects …

'What we are doing is subsidizing the white man's business operations at the expense of native welfare … Now, I agree with you, this would not matter if the profits stayed where they were produced, *but they don't* … they're whipped off back to Britain, or France, or Belgium or Holland or wherever …'

'A three-gallon bottle with two glass tubes passing through the rubber stopper, yes, I've got that … One tube reaches the bottom of the bottle to take up the liquid and pass it out to a rubber tube and then to the injection canula. I see. The other glass tube through the stopper you attach to the bicycle pump … Oh, I see, a foot pump … I thought you might mean …'

'Let's not forget that railways act as an instrument of civilization,' said Ehrendorf vaguely, his eyes probing the darkness for some sign of hope, 'bringing isolated people into contact with the modern world.'

'Slavery used to be defended in those very words! Besides, in Africa natives died by the hundreds of thousands just in building the damn things. Look at the Belgian Congo under Leopold! You see, what I'm trying to explain is how everything in a colony, even beneficial-sounding things like railways and experimental rice-growing stations, are set up in one way or another to the commercial advantage of the Europeans or Americans with money invested in the country …'

'D'you mind if we just go over the sites of injection once more,' cried Dr Brownley in a voice of despair. 'No, operator, this is an important matter, a matter of life and death. I'm a doctor, will you kindly get off the line, please. Now, fluid equal to fifteen per cent of body weight into the arterial system? 450 cc to a pound, yes, I've got that. Two per cent body weight to be injected into each femoral artery towards the toes. One per cent into each brachial artery towards the fingers, yes. One common carotid artery towards head with two per

cent. Inject same carotid towards heart with seven per cent. Total amount of fluid should come to fifteen per cent body weight. What happens, though, if the blood in the artery has clotted, as I'm afraid it might have by now, and you can't force the fluid in? Wait a moment, I'm trying to note it down, yes … the extremity should be wrapped in cotton wool soaked in the fluid and then bandaged … and you keep on soaking the cotton at intervals. Good. Another thing I want to know is whether one has to inject fluid into the thoracic and abdominal cavities?'

'How frightful!' thought Walter, and despite the heat his skin became gooseflesh and even the bristles on his spine rose in horror. Meanwhile, the two young men had reached the foot of the white marble steps which curved up to the portico and thence to the verandah. Still talking nonsense they began to ascend.

'How about the rights of the individual, imported along with a Western legal system? Isn't that worth having, Matthew?'

'Freedom of the individual at the expense of food, clothing and a harmonious life, of being swindled by a system devised to the advantage of those with capital? If you had asked the inmates of the coolie barracks in Rangoon, dying by their hundreds from malnutrition and disease, I'm sure they would have told you that wonderful though being free was, just at the moment so wretched was their condition that it wasn't much help. It's no good calling somebody free unless he's economically free, too, at least to some extent … Is it? … however much lack of individual freedom may horrify an English intellectual sitting at his desk with a hot dinner under his belt.'

'Yet even if one admits, and I'm not saying I do,' replied Ehrendorf, 'that the natives in British and other colonies have been placed at a disadvantage, or even swindled and abused, can you actually say that they would have been better off left strictly alone? You could say that the coming of Western capital is simply a bitter pill that they have to swallow if they are ever to achieve a higher state of civilization … In others words, that capitalism is like a disease against which no traditional culture anywhere has any resistance and that, in the circumstances, in Malaya and other colonies it could have been worse and will certainly get better.'

'Perhaps,' said Matthew dubiously, 'at some future period men will be able to look back and say, why, it was merely a bitter pill they had to swallow before achieving their present state of felicity, but for the moment, although it's clear what they've lost with their traditional way of life, it's not so easy to see what they've gained. Improved medicine in some places, but mainly to combat new illnesses we've brought with us. Education … largely to become unemployable or exploited clerks in the service of our businesses or government departments … And so on.'

'I say, Walter, are you there?' called Dr Brownley who had left the telephone and was peering uneasily out on to the darkened verandah. 'Oh, there you are, I didn't see you at first. What a business!' he added, mopping his brow. 'It seems we must wash the entire body with the fluid, including the face, ears and hair … and we can get rid of any post-mortem staining of the face by massage.'

Walter did not reply. He was looking at the silhouettes of Matthew and Ehrendorf who had paused by the wire door to the verandah and were looking out towards the restlessly moving searchlights over the docks. Dr Brownley, distraught, began to think of a matter which had occupied his mind almost exclusively for the past few days: walking with an innocent mind and a serene, untroubled expression on his face along the street his eye had happened to stray to Whiteaway's window and there, alas, had found itself locked in the basilisk stare emitted by a certain article of an almost infinite desirability, agreed, but costing $985.50. How could a man afford such a price? Yes, but how could a man do without such an article? These were the horns of the Doctor's dilemma. But first he would have to deal with this dreadful business of embalming old Langfield.

'There's only one way, it seems to me,' said Matthew with a sigh, 'in which our colonies could begin to get the benefits of their contact with us …'

'And what's that, I should like to know?' came Walter's forbidding voice from within, startling the two young men.

'Oh, hello, Walter. Well, by kicking us out and running the mines and plantations for their own profit instead of ours. In other words, a revolution!' He smiled wearily. 'The only trouble with a revolution is that it seldom improves things and very often makes them worse.'

'Obviously they too are subject to my Second Law,' smiled Ehrendorf.

'But it wasn't that that I wanted to see you about, Walter. I wanted to ask for your help in another matter entirely.'

'And what might that be?' Walter did not sound encouraging. Matthew explained that he was trying to help Miss Chiang to leave Singapore because she would run a particular risk if the city fell to the Japanese. It seemed impossible, however, to get her the necessary passport and permit to leave. Perhaps Walter could do something …?

'I don't see how I can help,' said Walter testily. 'With all the red tape I can't get anything done myself these days.' Although there was some truth in this, Walter would not have felt inclined to help in any case. He considered it a sign of 'the spirit of the times' that Matthew should be seeking a favour for a Eurasian woman with little concern for propriety as if she were his wife.

'I thought it might be easier to get her an exit permit if she were travelling with someone who had a British passport. Presumably Joan will be leaving soon? Perhaps she could go with Joan if you have no objection?'

'That's up to Joan,' replied Walter shortly. 'You'd better ask her and Nigel.' From his tone it was plain that he did not want to discuss the matter further.

When the two young men had retreated, in silence this time, the way they had come, the Doctor cleared his throat. 'I say, Walter, d'you think you could give me a hand in the dining-room for a few minutes. I can't get hold of anyone to help me on account of these damned air-raids. This job shouldn't be too difficult, fortunately, but I've never had to do it before … And by the way, please don't let me forget to plug the anus, mouth and nostrils with cotton soaked in the embalming fluid. Oh yes, and what I wanted to ask you was this: do you think that the Langfield and Bowser shareholders will want to keep the body a long time? I mean, they aren't thinking of keeping it in a glass case in the board-room or anything like that, are they? Because the thing is this: If they do want to keep it we shall have to rub it with plenty of Vaseline and bandage it to prevent it from drying out … I say, Walter, is anything the matter?'

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'I'll make sure that she has money, of course, and take care of the ticket. We think it may be easier to get her an exit permit if she is employed, at least nominally, by someone with a British passport. She won't be any trouble, Joan, I guarantee.'

'Nigel,' Joan called to her fiancé, invisible in the room behind her, 'Matthew wants to know if we can take someone with us? I don't think we can, can we?'

'I don't think you realize how urgent it is …'

'A Eurasian girl, you say? An *amah*? A servant? Really, it's impossible.'

'Not a servant … a friend.'

'I'm sorry.'

'Joan, this isn't just anyone. It's someone you *know*. She'll be in deadly danger if the Japanese ever take Singapore and she's still here. Vera has told me that you were there when the Japs arrested her in Shanghai … You know better than anyone what will happen to her if they find her here!'

'Nigel, there's nothing we can do, is there?'

A voice called something from the interior of the room which Matthew was unable to make out.

'Sorry, Miss Chiang should have thought about all this earlier in the day. There's nothing we can do, I'm afraid.'

'To hell with you then, you bitch!' cried Matthew in a voice that took even him by surprise.

Since the air-raids which had on successive days devastated Tanglin, Beach Road and the central part of the city, many Europeans had at last come to realize the extreme danger that they ran. Even if it were improbable that the Japanese would be permitted to land on Singapore Island itself, the fact remained that their air force, whose control of the sky was no longer seriously disputed by the few and rapidly diminishing fighters of the RAF, could inflict all the damage that was necessary. Such was the confidence of the Japanese bombers that they now droned constantly over the city in daylight, flying at a great height, twenty thousand feet or more, in enormous packs that for some reason were always in multiples of twenty-seven, causing Europeans below to think that there must be something sinister and unusual about Japanese arithmetic. At such a height they were well beyond the range of the light anti-aircraft guns which made up the greater part of Singapore's air defences. And so the truth had begun to dawn on the inhabitants of the city: if attacked from the air they were defenceless.

Many European women who had bravely declared that they would 'stay put' now had second thoughts or at least yielded to the demands of their men-folk that they should leave forth-with. The result was that every day crowds assembled at the shipping offices in search of passages to Europe, Australia or India. But, although earlier in the month many ships had sailed from Singapore with room to spare (Mrs Blackett and Mrs Langfield had marvelled at the deserted decks and echoing state-rooms of the *Narkunda*) now, quite suddenly it seemed, you were lucky to find a berth on any sort of vessel going anywhere. Partly this was the result of the chaos in the docks, where unloading had almost seized up under the bombing; partly it was the result of the diminished ability of the RAF to defend incoming convoys in the sea approaches to the Island, now rendered hazardous to a distance of twenty miles or more by prowling Japanese bombers.

Matthew's efforts to help Vera had so far been frustrated as much by the perplexing regulations which governed departure from the Colony as by the rapidly swelling numbers of those who wanted to leave. Moreover, so much of his time was taken up by his duties as a fireman that he had little time or energy to spare to help and encourage her. One of the major difficulties was to find *somewhere for her to go*. After a series of tiring and time-consuming enquiries he had at length succeeded in discovering that it was government policy that women and children, irrespective of race, should be allowed to leave if they wanted to. To begin with he had thought it would be best to send Vera to Australia … but Australia had agreed to accept only a limited number of Asiatics and Vera had returned empty-handed from their temporary immigration office, depressed and exhausted after many hours of waiting.

Why had she been refused? Were her papers not in order or was there some other reason? Vera shook her

head; she had been unable to get any explanation from the harassed and impatient officials at the office. Her papers certainly did not look very convincing. Under the Aliens Ordinance, 1932, she had been given merely a landing-permit which she had been obliged to exchange for a certificate of admission valid for two years and renewable. Matthew nudged his glasses up on his nose and examined the document despondently: it identified Vera merely as a landed immigrant resident in the Straits Settlements. If she needed a passport would she be able to get one at this eleventh hour? And what country would give her a passport? Time was running out so quickly. He was somewhat heartened, however, by the knowledge that it was official government policy that Vera, in common with other women, should leave if she wanted to.

Next, Vera had gone to another office to enquire whether she would be permitted to go to India. She had again been obliged to wait for many hours and once more it had proved to be in vain. On this occasion, although there had been no racial difficulty as there had been with Australia, she had been asked for evidence that she would have enough money to support herself in India. She had had none and by the time Matthew had taken out a letter of credit for her with the Hong Kong and Shanghai Bank and sent her back again another two precious days had passed and she was once more obliged to join a long line of anxious people besieging the office … it had closed before she had been able to get anywhere near the counter. To make matters worse, Matthew could see that with weariness and disappointment Vera had grown fatalistic: she no longer believed that she would be allowed to leave Singapore before the Japanese arrived. Matthew, who in the meantime had been waiting fruitlessly on her behalf in another equally anxious queue at the Chinese Protectorate to apply for an exit permit, had secretly begun to wonder whether she might not be right. However, he did his best to reassure her, saying that certainly she would be able to escape and that the Japanese would be most unlikely to take Singapore.

Matthew was so tired these days that his few off-duty hours were spent in a waking trance. If he so much as sat down for a moment he was liable to fall asleep immediately; it seemed that his mind would only work in slow motion. If only he had had time to sleep he felt he might have been able to think of some solution, some way of getting through this baffling maze of administrative regulations. Add to that the difficulty, under constant air-raids, of accomplishing the most simple formalities. In search of a document you went to some office, only to find that it had been evacuated, nobody knew where. Then further exhausting searches through other offices, which themselves might have removed themselves to a safer area outside the city, would be necessary before you could locate the office you wanted.

While in the queue at the Chinese Protectorate Matthew had been told by some of the other people waiting that Vera would need passport photographs in order to obtain her exit permit. She had none and these days it had become impossible to obtain them. Change Alley, which had once swarmed with photographers who were only too willing to snap you in any official pose you wished, or even in a grotto of cardboard tigers and palms, was deserted, for the photographers had all been Japanese and were now interned. So what was to be done? Matthew considered buying a camera and taking the photographs himself, but this was hardly a solution: he would still have to find someone to develop and print them. To make matters worse Matthew had heard from the Major, who had heard from someone at ARP headquarters, that the troopships, the *West Point* and the *Wakefield*, which were bringing the 18th Division, would soon be able to take a great number of women and children to safety, provided that they could avoid the Japanese bombers. To know that only bureaucratic formalities prevented Vera from having this chance of escape filled Matthew with bitterness and despair. After five days of roaming the hot and increasingly ruined city with her in the last week of January, obliged to take shelter at intervals in the nearest storm-drain, he felt utterly exhausted and demoralized.

‘Don’t worry, we’ll find a way,’ he told her as he was leaving her one evening after another unsuccessful search for a photographer. ‘Didn’t you once have a camera?’ He remembered that she had wanted to show him some pictures of his father. Yes, but it had only been a box-camera and anyway it had been stolen. Vera was lying on her bed in an odd, crumpled position, the very picture of hopelessness. She gave him a wan smile however, and told him in turn not to worry. After he had gone, she would get up and go and see someone she knew who might be able to help. Some hours later, returning from the docks with the Mayfair AFS unit, he passed near where she lived and asked the Major to stop for a moment so that he could ask whether she had been successful. With refugees from across the Causeway the number of people living in Vera’s tenement had greatly increased and he had difficulty making his way past those sleeping on the stairs and in the corridor. When he had at last reached Vera’s cubicle he found that she was still lying on the bed in the same odd position, just as he had left her. It seemed that she no longer even had the will to move.

‘You must come with me to the Mayfair,’ he said. ‘Bring a toothbrush and whatever else you need.

But Vera shook her head. ‘No Matthew, I am better to stay here. Soon I will feel better.’

‘But it’s dangerous here. You’re too near the river and the docks.’

Again she shook her head. Nothing he could say would make her change her mind.

‘I must go. They’re waiting for me outside. You stay here and rest … I know how tired you must be. And don’t worry about the photographs. I’ll think of something …’

Having returned to the Mayfair still, despite his reassuring words to Vera, without any idea of what to do next, Matthew was greeted by the smiling face of Mr Wu, to whom he had already spoken of the difficulty of finding a photographer. Mr Wu had thought of a solution to the problem in the meantime. He had an interest in a Chinese newspaper which would undoubtedly employ a photographer. It would take nothing more than a

telephone call: by evening Vera would have her photographs. It seemed almost too good to be true.

Tired though he was, Matthew set off again, this time on a bicycle he had borrowed, to tell Vera the good news. The streets were just beginning to get light; in Chinatown the first shadowy figures were emerging after the night's curfew. On his way along Southbridge Road, however, he was astonished to see that a great crowd of women and children had already formed outside one of the buildings and he thought: 'Good heavens! What can they possibly want at this time in the morning?' But then he realized that they were waiting outside the passport office for it to open and his heart sank at the thought that the photographs were only the beginning.

Vera had been asleep: she gazed at him with dulled eyes as he told her about the photographs.

'Don't you see!' he exclaimed irritably. 'Now we'll be able to get the exit permit and everything else!' He was angry with her for not having reacted with more enthusiasm. It seemed that she had given up hope at the very moment that they had a chance of success. But his anger melted away almost immediately. 'You mustn't give up hope,' he said more gently. 'When did you last have something to eat?' He went out then to the food-stalls at the end of the street and presently returned with some soup and a dish of fried rice. He had to feed her with chopsticks, like a child: she was utterly exhausted. While he fed her he spoke to her encouragingly: when they had the photographs they would go to the Chinese Protectorate and get her an exit permit and whatever else was needed. After all, the Government wanted her to leave: they said so! Then they would get her a berth on a boat to Colombo or, failing that, to England. He would have money sent to a bank there for her. She could stay in a hotel and he would join her as soon as he could get away from Singapore. By tomorrow evening or perhaps the one after that, they should have all the necessary papers: then they could go together and register her name at the P & O office. They would certainly be in time to get her on one of the ships that were due to leave soon.

'I don't want to leave without you.'

'But you must. If the Japs take Singapore …'

'You always said they wouldn't,' she said, smiling at last.

'Well, perhaps not. Who knows?' Matthew no longer knew himself whether he believed that Singapore would hold out. 'I must go now before the morning raids begin. Is there anywhere for you to shelter if the bombers come this way?'

Vera shook her head. 'Don't worry. I feel better now.' She smiled again and squeezed his hand. 'I'm sorry to have been "a weak link".'

'You're not a weak link,' said Matthew, delighted to see her more cheerful. 'Don't forget to eat something today, even if it's only a pair of white mice on toast.'

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In these last days of January it had become General Percival's habit to rise before dawn and spend an hour in his office before leaving by car for Johore just over the Causeway where the fighting was now taking place. As a rule, therefore, it was still dark outside the bathroom window while he was shaving. But he had had a restless night and had reached the bathroom a little later than usual: the sky was already brightening as he rubbed a finger over his bristly chin. In the course of the night two matters of enormous importance had loomed-up over his halfsleeping mind saying: 'Remember us tomorrow!' But now, as he delved to drag them into the light, he could scarcely believe that he had taken them seriously. One of these anxieties had concerned transport: the prospect that every motor-car and lorry in his Army might have a simultaneous puncture causing the entire force to freeze up had afflicted him dreadfully. Was it nothing more than that? Evidently not.

Well, what was the other worry? During the night he had decided that he must issue orders to the effect that all dripping taps, both civilian and military, must be turned off at the main forthwith or provided with new washers. This was ridiculous too, but at least he knew what had caused it. The day before he had had a brief word with Brigadier Simson, the Director-General Civil Defence, who had made some gloomy observations about Singapore's water supply: it appeared that out here in the tropics where there was no danger of pipes freezing up, the municipal engineers did not bury them deep underground as they did in England: hence they were vulnerable to bombs. Already there had been considerable damage.

In a moment of intuition he realized, too, the source of his worry about punctures … it was the fear that both the 53rd (British) Brigade and the Segamat force might be cut off by the Japanese before they had time to retreat through the bottleneck at Yong Peng. But that was a danger which was now in the past, thank heavens. Strange that it should continue even so to torment him in his dreams. But … he brushed all that aside. He had more important things to think about.

As he began to shave, though, he did not think about them. He began to think about other things, about the Governor, and about oil dumps, and about his mother in Hertfordshire. What a terrible year 1941 had been! And yet it had seemed to start off so well with his appointment as GOC Singapore. In April, even before he had left England, his mother had died suddenly. She had been getting on in years, mind you, but it had been a heavy blow, nevertheless. All the same, once or twice recently when he had been in low spirits, it had occurred to him that perhaps, after all, her death had been a blessing in disguise, sparing her from

unnecessary suffering on his account.

He stood poised, razor in hand, gazing at his lathered face in the mirror. A commander must be a man of strength of purpose and authority, like General Dobbie who had once no doubt shaved in this very mirror. But his own face with its thick white beard of lather looked encouragingly commanding and purposeful. With care, for he had been a staff officer long enough to know that one must be scrupulous in attention to detail, he began to attack the fringes of the lather, driving it inwards from its perimeter at ears and throat with tiny strokes of the blade in the direction of chin, lips and moustache. Here he would presently have it surrounded, if his experience was anything to go by, and would finish it off with a few decisive strokes.

Meanwhile, his mind had begun to feed once more on that run of bad luck which had assailed him so abruptly. His mother had not been dead a year and yet his whole career and perhaps even his life itself were in jeopardy. He had served on the Western Front in the Great War and had kept his eyes open. Yes, he knew what was what! For the truth was, if you were not on the Western Front you were *nowhere* … at least as far as the Powers That Be were concerned. The same thing went for this war, too. Right from the start he had been in no doubt about that. You only had to look at the obsolete equipment and untrained men, the odds and ends and riff-raff from India and Australia, all speaking different tongues. You only had to look at the way his best officers had been milked off to lend tone to the Middle Eastern and European theatres to know that Malaya Command was not very much in anybody's thoughts in Whitehall. The big reputations would be made in Europe: it had happened before and it would happen again. Europe was the fashionable place for a soldier to display his skills. Out here a man could perform miracles of military strategy and much good would it do him! Nobody would pay the slightest attention. But make a blunder and, ah! then it would be different.

'Out here you can destroy your career in two shakes, but can you make one? Not an earthly.'

The door-handle rattled faintly as someone tried it discreetly from the outside, but it was locked. Could that be Pulford up and about already? Percival paused again, this time about to launch a flanking attack along his jaw from the direction of his right ear. If it was Pulford, he himself must be running even later than he had realized. He usually beat Pulford to the breakfast table. Poor Pulford! His career, too, depended on obsolete equipment … fancy having to send up the poor old Vildebeeste against modern Jap fighter planes! He had taken a liking to Pulford partly through loneliness, for neither man had brought out his family; he had not for a moment regretted inviting him to come and live here. One needed a staunch friend in a place as full of intrigue and back-biting as Singapore.

'They're all watching out for their own interests, every man jack of 'em, beginning with the Governor!'

How could the GOC Malaya be expected to defend a country whose civilians devoted their every effort to baulking his initiatives? What had happened to the Straits Settlements Volunteer Force, for instance? You might well ask! Volunteer force indeed! When he had tried to call up part of it for training the civilians had created such a song and dance that the Government had insisted on his abandoning the rest of the training programme. Why? Because a rash of strikes on the plantations had been blamed on the fact that the Europeans were absent … while the truth of the matter was that they were not paying their workers enough. Naturally, he had protested. A waste of time! The Governor had waved some instructions from the Colonial Office in his face: these declared that exemption from training should not be what he (the GOC) considered practicable 'but what he, the Governor, thought was necessary to keep up tin and rubber production'.

And now, when retreat to the Island had become inevitable (as you were! 'withdrawal' to the Island), would you believe it? He was up to his tricks again. This time Sir Shenton was declining to intervene with the Chinese Protectorate who were refusing exit permits to Chinese who wanted to leave the Colony. He had done his best to spell it out to the Governor: in a very short time they would find themselves under siege on an island already teeming with refugees. Non-combatants must not only be allowed but *encouraged* to leave, if necessary *made* to leave. But oh no, the Governor would not listen … for him this exit permit business was just another chapter in a story which had begun long before the Japanese had invaded. Sir Shenton Thomas was too august a figure to consider explaining himself to the GOC. But Percival had heard the story anyway from other sources. It seemed that the Chinese community had conceived a violent dislike of two senior officials of the Chinese secretariat: this pair were obsessed by the need to root out Communist infiltrators and even with the Japanese sweeping through Johore the fervour of their anti-Communist mission remained undimmed. It would have been sensible to get rid of these men months ago, to get the Chinese population firmly on the British side, but this the Governor would not do. The dignity of the British Government was at stake. You could not, in his opinion, start giving way to demands from the local population. Well, so much the worse for everyone. Other people had remonstrated with the Governor: Simson, the DGCD, for example, and a number of influential Chinese businessmen. Many Chinese would be on the Japanese death-list if Singapore fell. But it had been to no avail.

Percival had been scraping steadily at his commanding, white-bearded face. Gradually, as the razor advanced and the white beard fell away, the features in the mirror had grown more uncertain: a rather delicate jaw had appeared, followed by a not very strong chin and a mouth not sufficiently assertive for the moustache on its upper lip. Nevertheless, it was the face of a man anxious to do his best. Percival washed it carefully and mopped it, gasping slightly. As he did so the door-handle turned again. 'Just a minute,' he called. Silence and a vague air of expectation was all that came from the other side of the door. But why, Percival wondered, should Pulford want to use this bathroom when he had one of his own? Perhaps it was

simply that he had left his shaving-tackle here. No doubt this rather unimpressive toothbrush was his; Percival inspected with disapproval its splayed and wilting bristles; it looked as if his batman had been cleaning his cap-badge with it.

His eyes moved back to the mirror to study with sympathy his clean-shaven but drawn features. Weariness was becoming a disease of epidemic proportions in Singapore these days and the past week had, perhaps, been the most exhausting in his life, spent in long car journeys back and forth to the front for conferences with his commanders. He had decided, however, that if disaster were not to ensue he must supervise the defence of Johore himself.

Alas, even this, he reflected, scrubbing his prominent teeth with tooth-powder from the round tin by the mirror, had not been enough, for Gordon Bennett had blundered. In Percival's view it was not surprising that he had blundered, given his mentality and erratic behaviour. It was unfortunate that nothing could be done about Bennett without risk of offending the Australian Government. Bennett, moreover, had made a good impression on Wavell who had lately insisted on putting him in charge of the vulnerable west coast in the place of the battered III Corps. Good impression notwithstanding it was Bennett who had left the unfortunate, untrained 45th Indian Brigade to secure his communications on the coast from the Muar River southwards against amphibious attacks that were all too predictable. The Japanese had naturally made short work of encircling the 45th Brigade and all subsequent efforts to rescue them had failed. Indeed, one had to be thankful that in the end it had been possible to withdraw the rest of the force by the trunk road and railway without having a substantial part of it cut off by the Japanese strike from the coast. Percival heaved a sigh. By now it was clear in any case that a retreat to Singapore Island would be inevitable.

There had been moments since the opening of the war in Malaya when Percival had been visited by an exceedingly curious notion. Though he had done his best, as a pragmatic military man, to shrug it off, it had nevertheless returned more and more frequently in the past few days. Now it entered his mind again as he wearily threw his towel over his shoulder and unlocked the bathroom door. 'Good morning,' he said to Pulford who was hovering dejectedly in the corridor in a pair of pyjamas of Air Force blue. Pulford, too, had a thin face but more deeply lined than his own and with ears that stood out sharply from the side of his head; his moustache, moreover, was distinctly less generous … a mere smudge around the channel beneath his nose, creeping a little way out along his upper lip. Still, his features gave the impression of a decent and dependable sort of man. 'You need a new toothbrush, old chap,' Percival told him as he continued along the corridor. 'Do I?' asked Pulford, somewhat taken aback.

This exchange, unfortunately, had not been quite enough to distract Percival's attention from his new train of thought, which could be summarized in one simple question. Had this entire campaign, in which tanks, ships and aeroplanes had taken part and in which thousands of men had already died, been staged or devised by Fate or by some unseen hand simply in order to make a mockery of his own private hopes and ambitions? Percival was not accustomed to think in such terms. He was a practical man. He did not believe in 'unseen hands'. That sort of thing was balderdash in his view. He still thought so … yet the way in which, time and again, a flaw had appeared in his defences, first on one flank, then on the other … the way in which there always proved to be just one missing element (the aircraft carrier, for instance, which would have prevented the sinking of the *Prince of Wales* and the *Repulse* but which had *gone aground* on the way to Singapore: how often in a man's lifetime does an aircraft carrier go aground that it should do so on the only occasion that he needed it?), a missing element which in due course would bring down a crucial part of the defensive edifice he had been trying to construct, this had begun to have its effect on Percival as it would on any reasonable man.

It was easy, Percival knew, when a fellow got tired for him to get things out of proportion. He was tired. He knew that, admitted it straight out. Still, he was aware of the risk and was determined to be objective. He was only interested in what the evidence had to say. Well, the fact was that all these apparently random acts of fate, all these strokes of bad luck, had now begun (for the man putting his thin legs into shorts wide enough to have accommodated not only the GOC but a member of his staff into the bargain) to appear suspiciously weighted against him. For if you looked at what had happened carefully enough and remained objective, you could see that some hidden hand had been tampering with what one might reasonably expect to have been the normal course of events. It was as if, to speak plainly, on life's ladder some unseen hand had all but sawn through a number of the more important rungs.

The defence of Malaya had been organized before the war on the assumption that the RAF would deal with enemy forces before they had a chance to get ashore. But, in the event, the RAF, suffering from a suspicious lack of planes, had been quite unable to do this. Well, never mind. They were busy elsewhere. Such things do happen. But if, having put your foot on the RAF rung and heard it snap under your weight you thought, well, you still had your other foot on the strike across the Siamese border, here, too, you would have found yourself treading all too firmly on thin air, for the man in charge of that operation had been poor old Brookers, an actor quite improbably cast in the rôle of Commander-in-Chief, Far East.

A commander, as Percival very well knew, cannot always have things his own way. But when *everything* is designed to frustrate him he may well begin to wonder. To be expected to fight against trained men with

untrained men, to fight without naval or air support worth mentioning through a sweltering country of apathetic natives and exasperating Europeans whose only aim is to obstruct him, frankly that is too much: he begins to see that he is the victim of some pretty curious circumstances.

Consider for a moment the defence of Johore that he had been trying to organize. When he had been GSO1 to General Dobbie in 1937 fixed defences had been planned for Johore to protect Singapore Island from overland attack. But where were they now that overland attack had developed? They were non-existent. Very well. Consider now Gordon Bennett, the man in command of the Australian Imperial Force in Malaya on whom he had to rely for the defence of Johore (with 'Piggy' Heath, of course, and his Indians). It was common knowledge that Bennett had been repeatedly passed over for the command of Australian forces sent to the Middle East; he was considered too difficult and erratic. There was no prospect, you might have thought, of such a man (a man of whom both the Australian War Minister and the Chief of the General Staff disapproved) being given command of the Australians in Malaya. So you might have thought. But already the sound of discreet sawing could be heard and presently these two influential men who disapproved of Bennett (the War Minister and the Chief of the General Staff) trod simultaneously on another weakened rung and the plane in which they were both travelling crashed in Canberra. They were replaced by men partial to Gordon Bennett. Aha! Bennett had wasted no time in promoting in turn Lieutenant-Colonel Maxwell, an- 'amateur' militia soldier and peacetime doctor, over the heads of more senior battalion commanders to take command of the 27th Australian Brigade on its way to Malaya. Maxwell, by the way, liked to keep his HQ near to Bennett's in case he should need a spot of assistance. Maxwell, a rank outsider!

Or consider how Johore had been lost: that is to say, as a result of their inability to secure either flank against amphibious landings. The fortunes of war? But this would not have come about if that aircraft carrier had not gone aground in Jamaica and if the *Prince of Wales* and the *Repulse* had not in consequence been lost. But no, let us not be difficult. Let the carrier go aground! Sink the ships! It was a cruel and unexpected blow but never mind, he would bow his head. A commander sometimes had to put up with cruel and unexpected blows. Yes, but what he should not have to put up with is that faint rasp of metal teeth on wood! For if he followed the naval situation a little further back and strained his ears Percival could hear it again, quite clearly, that discreet rasping sound. He was now thinking of the French Far Eastern Fleet and how eager it had been to join the British in Singapore. It would have made all the difference, too, no doubt about it. But beneath the loyalty of Admiral Decoux, that friend and admirer of the British, that most patriotic of men (you might have thought) a sinister little cone of sawdust was beginning to pile up. The only man who could prevent the French fleet joining the British had, by an unfortunate coincidence (rasp! rasp! rasp!), a secret ambition to become Governor-General of Indo-China.

Percival stifled a groan and stood up to draw in the double-pronged buckle of his Sam Browne belt, passing the shoulder-strap beneath the flap on the right shoulder of his shirt; as he did so his groping fingers touched the solid little crown on his shoulder-flap and the sensation brought with it a sharp reminder of his rank and duties. If it was his job to fight not only the Japanese but an unseen hand as well, then so be it. It was his duty to get on with the job and leave the speculation to future historians who, he did not doubt, would not fail to find something fairly fishy about the way events had coincided against him. He glanced at the rectangular face of his wrist-watch. How late it was! No wonder Pulford had been trying to get into the bathroom. On his way down the corridor he glimpsed Pulford through the half-open door of his room in the act of adjusting a sock-suspender around a grey calf.

Breakfast. A cool and succulent slice of papaya, tea and toast. When he had finished he went directly to his office to study the latest situation reports and evaluate the night's events. Then, with the balding, long-nosed, rather grim figure of the Brigadier General Staff, he went through the agenda for the daily meeting of the War Council: he must remember to have a final shot at getting the Governor to do something about exit permits for the Chinese if it were not already too late. Should he not be back from Johore Bahru in time the BGS would have to attend the War Council meeting in his place. Today, 28 January, was going to be another crucial day on the other side of the Causeway.

By 08.40 he was speeding across the island on his way to confer with General Heath at III Corps Headquarters, now located just on the other side of the Causeway in Johore Bahru. As he sat in the back of the car, his face beautifully shaven but expressionless, he swiftly reviewed the plans that had been made by Heath and his staff for the withdrawal of his entire force across the Causeway to Singapore Island. He had hoped until yesterday not to have put this plan into operation, particularly now that the 18th (British) Division was about to arrive. But alas, there was nothing else for it. Were his men to remain in Johore their flanks would still be threatened by amphibious attack, as Singapore Island itself would be, of course. Moreover, communications would depend on the narrow Causeway, all too vulnerable to air attack.

To withdraw is a delicate business at the best of times, but to withdraw such a disparate collection of forces from across a wide front back into the narrow neck of a funnel in the face of such a rapidly advancing enemy would require a degree of accuracy and discipline verging on the miraculous. Should one contingent withdraw too quickly it would automatically expose the flanks of its neighbours. General Heath's 11th Division was to cover the crossroads at Skudai where the roads from east and west converged, (pinching in the funnel to its narrow neck) until the forces from the west coast had passed through. Meanwhile, yesterday afternoon the 8th Brigade of General Barstow's 9th Indian Division had begun to withdraw down the railway in the direction of

Layang Layang, passing through the 22nd Brigade under Brigadier Painter who had been ordered to hold his ground in concert with the phased withdrawal elsewhere.

'These manoeuvres can be a sticky business,' mused Percival, raising a hand to shield his eyes from the sudden glare reflected from the surface of the water as the car emerged from the foliage of the island and sped out over the Causeway. Yes, such a delicate operation, mismanaged, could result in the most fearful mess. He sighed. The car hurtled on over the water.

If you had been watching it from the island you would have seen that camouflaged staff-car gradually diminish in size until it became merely a moving dot in the distance; the next moment it had disappeared altogether as it plunged into the streets of Johore Bahru. One hour, two hours passed. The sun changed its position so that the glare from the Strait of Johore became even more dazzling. At last a tiny moving dot appeared again on the mainland side of the Causeway cutting in and out of the slow line of traffic and rapidly growing larger until it revealed itself as the same car carrying Percival back from his conference with Heath. Heath had been worried about the ability of the 11th Division (the poor devils who had been in the thick of it since Jitra) to hold out much longer against the Japanese Imperial Guards. As a result the crossing of the Causeway had been moved forward twenty-four hours. At least, Percival reflected, again shielding his eyes, he would not get into hot water with the Chief of Staff, for Wavell had given him permission to withdraw to the Island at his own discretion. That old warrior had seen in the end that there would be nothing else for it. Unlike Churchill who a week earlier had sent instructions that they were to fight in the ruins of Singapore if necessary, Wavell had some conception of what they were up against.

How drab and dismal Singapore Island looked at a distance! And yet it would be here on this grey-green slab of land surrounded by glaring water that the most important events of his life would undoubtedly take place, providing he got his troops back to it safely. This thought reminded him that there had been one slightly disturbing piece of news at III Corps. Nothing too serious for the moment, just that contact had been lost temporarily with 22nd Brigade: that was the one which had been ordered to hold firm in front of Layang Layang. General Barstow was going forward now to find out what was the matter.

Later in the day, while Percival was in the Operations Room in Sime Road, he was observed by Sinclair who now found himself back there, much chastened and perplexed by his participation in the action at the Slim River: this in the end had amounted to a brief and disagreeable traffic accident and a good deal of even more disagreeable crawling through miles of jungle to get back to a British-held position. To make matters worse he had broken his wrist in his collision with the tank, although he had not realized it at first in the heat of the moment: this had soon become extremely painful, and all the more so as two hands are needed for making one's way through the jungle. He would probably not have got through at all without the help of a little party of resourceful and determined Argylls who, like himself, had been over-run by the enemy attack, and were also making their way back. It had been gruelling enough, certainly, but there was no use trying to conceal the fact: he had hoped for more from his first active engagement. If only he had been at the bridge he could have joined in some real fighting. But he had gathered from his brother officers that even there it had not lasted very long. Sinclair could not help wondering whether warfare had not been a little spoiled by all the modern equipment that armies had taken to using. What fun was there in fighting with tanks? A cavalry charge would have been more his cup of tea. In any case, now he was back where he had started, and with his wrist in plaster into the bargain. Thank heaven that at least they had allowed him to do something useful!

Sinclair, busy though he was, was deeply interested in the comportment of the GOC at this critical point in the campaign and every now and then he would snatch a glance in his direction. Percival's face wore a rather blank expression, rather like that which senior staff officers affected when on duty. Sinclair thought of it as a professional man's face … where the profession is of the kind which expects you to keep a careful watch on your dignity. Sinclair found it fascinating, though, to think that this was the man who was conducting the defence of Malaya; behind that expressionless face, even while Sinclair's eyes rested on its outer crust, the molten lava of history was boiling up!

Now some rather disturbing news was coming in: the 22nd Brigade had been cut off. Aghast though he was, Sinclair could not help keeping a surreptitious eye on the GOC to see how he was taking this news. Percival merely frowned slightly and looked annoyed, waiting for more details. It seemed that the 8th Brigade had retired further than planned, allowing the Japanese to move through the rubber around Painter's eastern flank and seize Layang Layang. More serious still, General Barstow had gone up the railway with two staff officers to investigate, had been ambushed and was now missing, having hurled himself down one side of the railway embankment while the two staff officers, who had escaped, had thrown themselves down the other. Barstow, an experienced and able soldier, would be sorely missed if, as seemed likely, he had been killed or captured. Now the question was whether it would be possible to rescue the 22nd Brigade without prejudicing the evacuation of the entire force. All too soon it became clear that Painter and his men would have to be left to fight their own way out through the jungle as best they could. And what hope was there that, having done so, they would then be able to get across the Strait?

Presently, Percival came to stand quite near Sinclair, talking something over with the BGS but in a voice too low for him to hear. Sinclair considered that he had taken the bad news about the 22nd Brigade with admirable composure; but, of course, one had to remember that Percival was a professional and one would no more expect him to throw himself on the floor in a tantrum at the loss of a brigade than one would expect a

grand master to utter a howl of anguish whenever one of his pawns was taken. That blank face of Percival's, Sinclair realized, was the face of a man who has excluded all unnecessary emotion from the job in hand because he knows that it will only hinder him. Sinclair watched and approved. But then, quite unexpectedly, despite his blank expression, Percival began to shout. He suddenly shouted that men could not work properly in such conditions.

The Operations Room at Sime Road consisted of a wooden hut about the width of a tennis court but longer, more than half as long again. Tables ran from one end to the other and supported a bewildering mass of maps, charts and documents. Here and there telephones were shrilling in little herds, all together like frogs in a pond. Add to this the overcrowding, for this room housed the RAF as well as the Army Staff, the jostling to get a look at wall maps and aircraft availability charts, the shouting into telephones and hammering of typewriters and all the other commotion one would expect in the central nervous system of that clanking, mechanical warrior which the modern army has become, as the campaign in which he is engaged begins to near its climax, and yes, one could very well see that General Percival, who after all had the main responsibility to bear, might find it something of a nightmare to conduct his campaign from such a mad-house.

But in due course it emerged that Percival was not complaining of the noise from inside the hut but from *outside*, where, in order to remedy the serious overcrowding at Sime Road, a party of Engineers were working to provide some further accommodation. The BGS scratched his balding head but showed no more surprise at Percival's outburst than he did at anything else. But all the same, to Sinclair it did seem peculiar. The fact was, you see, that with the noise *inside* the hut, a considerable racket, you could barely hear anything at all from outside. Sinclair cocked an ear and listened … but all he could hear was the faint whisper of a saw on wood as the men worked on the construction of the new hut.

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The number of people, mainly men, who had taken up lodging at or near the Mayfair Building had continued to grow day by day. Now there were people there whom the Major barely knew by sight, others whom he did not know at all. Certain of these newcomers merely came to hang about during the daytime, for thanks to the fire-fighting the Mayfair was a centre of activity and news, or, if not news, rumours. The latest rumour asserted that a gigantic American force of several divisions had passed through the Straits of Malacca during the night and landed near Alor Star in the north. When asked to confirm this rumour, however, Ehrendorf merely shook his head sadly.

Of all the new lodgers, none pleased the Major so much as the girls from the Poh Leung Kuk who were quartered in the Board Room. They were so helpful, so good-natured and polite! The Major was delighted with them: they appealed strongly to his paternal instincts. He was somewhat surprised, however, when one day Captain Brown, whom he had put in charge of them, asked him what was supposed to be done about their prospective bridegrooms? What bridegrooms? The ones, Captain Brown said, that kept calling to inspect the girls with a view to matrimony. He had paraded them himself, looked them over, and given them short shrift: not good enough. But the girls had been upset: they wanted a go at the bridegrooms themselves! They did not want Captain Brown who was used to having everything ship-shape and had spent a lifetime on the water-fronts up and down the China coast selecting crews with the jaundiced eye of experience, they did not want him to make their decisions for them!

This was a difficult problem. The Major was surprised, as a matter of fact, that at such a time, with the city being progressively smashed to bits from the air, there should be any prospective bridegrooms at all, but perhaps it was the very uncertainty of the situation which was causing single men to make up their minds. Well, there was no doubt in his mind, provided the men had some sort of credentials to prove that they did not want the girls to stock brothels and could produce the forty dollars for the trousseau, the girls themselves, not Captain Brown, must choose.

Captain Brown was indignant. He was not accustomed to having his decisions questioned: it was only out of politeness that he had mentioned the matter to the Major at all. Since he had obtained his Master's ticket all those years ago he had made it plain, as quite a few Owners had discovered to their cost, that he was not the sort of man who would countenance being interfered with in the correct exercise of his duties. The Major, taken aback, had tried to suggest to Captain Brown that this was note quite the same thing, that these girls, after all … But Captain Brown was adamant. Either they were under his command or they were not! And he had departed in a huff, leaving the Major to cope with the problem as best he could.

Dupigny, consulted, was of the opinion that the girls should be left to deal with the matter themselves. Although the Major would have liked and indeed intended to exercise some sort of supervision over the bridegrooms, he had so much on his mind these days that really he had no time to spare, and neither did anyone else. At best half an hour now and again could be set aside by Dupigny or Ehrendorf to inspect credentials, but in the existing conditions it was impossible even to do this properly. The girls were naturally delighted by their victory over Captain Brown and became more helpful than ever to the Major, showering him with little attentions, sewing on buttons for him and polishing his shoes. What splendid little things they

were! It was all he could do to prevent the little darlings from bringing him cups of tea whenever he sat down for a moment. Indeed, when they were not interviewing bridegrooms in the Board Room, which they were doing a lot of the time, they brought cups of tea to everyone at all hours of the day. The only thing that made the Major a little uneasy was the fact that though there was a constant and increasing supply of bridegrooms waiting to be summoned to the Board Room (now and again the door would open releasing a gale of giggles) they never actually seemed to *choose* one. Still, that was hardly his business.

Now the Major and Dupigny were making their way to the verandah for some fresh air, picking their way among sleeping firemen; the Major noticed as he passed that many of them had simply thrown themselves down on the floor with a cushion or a jacket under their heads, faces and clothes still blackened by the fire they had just been to. Weariness now affected everyone, causing men to stumble about as if they were drunk, or forget to deal with the most urgent matters. 'Really,' he thought, 'we can't be expected to go on much longer like this!'

To replace the wooden steps to the compound which had been carried away in the raid a week earlier a ladder had been improvised. The Major descended it stiffly, his movements made clumsy by fatigue.

'And who on earth is this?' he asked Dupigny rather petulantly, for even more people had arrived since he had last made a tour of inspection and had installed themselves in a sort of gypsy encampment among the score of brick pillars on which the bungalow was built. Here in the shade woman and children sat mournfully among piles of suitcases and other belongings. Some of them dozed or nursed crying babies, others stared blankly at the Major and Dupigny as they passed, red-eyed and seemingly in a state of shock.

'Refugees.'

'Of course, but why is nothing being done by the Government to take care them? *We* can't possibly be expected to feed them all. And what about sanitary arrangements? We'll have an epidemic in no time if they stay here. I thought schools had been taken over to house them. Perhaps you could enquire, François, and see if there's somewhere for them to go … The poor things are obviously too exhausted to find out for themselves.'

Dupigny smiled at his friend and made a gesture of helplessness; his experience of administration in Hanoi told him that even in the best conditions it would take several days or even weeks before Singapore was again able to cope adequately with its administrative problems, of which the refugees were only one. What about the water supply? The burial of the dead? The demolition of damaged buildings? The repair of damage done to vital roads, to gas, electricity and telephone installations? And then there was the storing and distribution of food, the struggle to prevent an epidemic of typhus or cholera, and a hundred and one other difficulties … None of these matters, Dupigny knew without any doubt, would be dealt with adequately, for the simple reason that there were not enough experienced men to do the job … some of them, he explained to the Major, would not be dealt with at all unless people took matters into their own hands … 'Like this fellow here,' he added.

They had passed through another little community, this time living in army tents scrounged from somewhere, and had come with a certain relief to an open space which led presently to the little wilderness of rare shrubs beyond which lay the Blacketts' compound. Beneath the shade of a rambutan a Chinese was digging a grave, or rather he had already dug the grave and was now shovelling earth back into it. On closer inspection the Chinese turned out to be Cheong who, for the past few days, had been working with astonishing energy and fortitude to provide meals at intervals for the ever-increasing number of volunteer firemen and their dependents. And now, not content with feeding people, here he was burying someone single-handed.

'Ah, Cheong,' said the Major peering into the grave where, however, nothing could be seen but the well-polished toes of a pair of stout English shoes. 'Good show,' he added, wanting to make it clear how much he appreciated Cheong's efforts.

'Whose grave is that?'

Cheong, without pausing in his digging, muttered a name which the Major had to cup his ear to catch.

'Not old Tom Prescott!' cried the Major in dismay. 'Why, François, I knew him well. He used to do a trick at parties with an egg.' And the Major gazed into the grave in concern.

Dupigny shrugged, as if to say: 'What else can one expect, the way things are?'

They moved on a little way. The Major, upset, mopped his brow with a silk handkerchief. 'Poor old Tommy,' he said. 'What a card he was! He used to have us in fits. Mind you, he was getting on in years. He'd had a good innings.'

The Major, too, Dupigny could not help thinking, was beginning to look his years; the lack of sleep and the ceaseless activity of the past few days had given his features a haggard appearance, accentuating the lines under his eyes; even his moustache had a chewed and patchy look, perhaps singed by drifting sparks at one of the fires he had attended.

'People are like bubbles, Brendan,' declared Dupigny in a sombre and sententious manner. 'They drift about for a little while and then they burst.'

'Oh, François, please!'

'Not clear bubbles which sparkle, but bubbles of muddy, blood-stained water. Prick them and they burst. Moreover, it is scientific,' he added, narrowing his eyes in a Cartesian manner. 'We are made of ninety-nine

per cent water, we are like cucumbers. So what do you expect?' If you prick a cucumber it does not burst, the Major thought of saying, but decided not to encourage his friend in this lugubrious vein.

Having returned to the bungalow they found Ehrendorf who had disappeared for an hour to drive some of the women refugees from up-country to Cluny to join the queue of people trying to register for passages at the P & O Agency House. He reported a scene of despair and chaos. Now, with what might be the last passenger ships for some time preparing to leave, men, women and children were braving the heat and the air-raids in an attempt to get away.

'Perhaps you should be on one of them yourself, Jim, unless you expect your army to arrive and rescue us and are merely waiting to welcome them ashore.'

'While François is still in the Colony I know it must be safe,' replied Ehrendorf with a smile.

'You surely do not expect me to leave on … *quelle horreur* … a troopship. If you have ever been on such a vessel you will know that there is at least one instance in which it is better to arrive than to travel. Besides, I am curious to see how it ends, this Singapore story.'

Matthew, too, arrived presently. He had spent the morning at the Chinese Protectorate trying to get an exit permit for Vera. They now had everything that was needed including photographs and had both been hopeful that at last they would be able to tackle the next obstacle of getting Vera registered with the P & O. But the exit permit had been refused without explanation. Matthew was still shocked by this set-back: he had been so certain that they would succeed. Curiously enough, this time Vera had seemed to be less affected than he was by the disappointment, had comforted him as best she could and had come back with him to the Mayfair.

'I know someone at the Protectorate,' said the Major suddenly. 'I think I shall go and have a word with him.'

It was not until later in the afternoon that the Major found time to telephone Smith at the Chinese Protectorate, asking to see him. Smith was discouraging. 'We're very busy here, Major. We have a whole lot of Chinese on our plate. What's it about?'

'I'm coming to see you now, Smith,' the Major told him sharply, 'and you'd better be there or else you'll find a dozen young women camping in your office tomorrow.'

'You'll never get through. Traffic jams.' There was silence for a moment, then Smith's voice asked suspiciously: 'What's it about?'

The Major rang off.

Word had now spread that two, or even more, of the troopships that had brought the 18th Division would be sailing that evening after dark. This was a further blow for Matthew, made no better by the knowledge that even if they had managed to get the exit permit they still would not have been able to complete the other formalities in time to get Vera on board. From early in the afternoon those prospective passengers fortunate enough to have been granted passages on the ships that were due to sail had begun to converge on the docks, with the result that delays and traffic jams soon began to develop. Eventually those who were trying to approach Keppel Harbour along Tanjong Pagar Road found that they could no longer move forward at all: so many cars had been abandoned in the road by passengers who had driven themselves to the docks that the stream of traffic had become hopelessly blocked by them. The situation both there and in the other approach roads was made even worse by the bomb-craters, the rubble from destroyed buildings which had not yet been cleared away, and by the efforts of the newly arrived 18th Division to unload their equipment and force a passage through for it in the opposite direction. Everywhere desperate people were sweltering in cars which crept forward at best only a few feet at a time through clouds of smoke or dust, thin in places, dense in others, between rows of heat-distorted buildings, accompanied by a nightmare braying of car-horns, the hammering of anti-aircraft guns and the crump of bombs falling ahead of them. Nearer the docks a number of buildings were on fire: there were godowns with roofs neatly carpeted with rectangles of flame and shop-houses with flames sprouting like orange weeds from every window. Some passengers began to realize that they would never reach the docks in time, but the greater the panic the worse the situation became. It was obvious, even to the Major, arriving after a considerable delay at the Chinese Protectorate on the corner of Havelock Road, that the embarkation had turned into a shambles.

The Major had half expected not to find Smith in his office but there he was at his desk, peering intently into one of its drawers which, however, contained nothing but a few whiskers of perforated paper left over from a sheet of postage stamps, a much-bitten pencil, and one or two wire paper-clips. Ignoring the Major's entrance he put the pencil between his teeth and after some deliberation selected one of the paper-clips. Sitting back he asked blandly: 'Well, what can I do for you, Major?'

The Major explained that he wanted an exit permit for Vera.

'Does she have a valid certificate of admission? Why doesn't she apply herself?'

'She *has* … and has been refused without explanation.'

'I'm afraid in that case …' said Smith, beginning to clean his ear with the paper-clip and inspecting it at intervals.

'She'll be in grave danger should the Japanese gain control of Singapore.'

'Can't do much about that, I'm afraid. But as a favour we'll have a little look at her file, shall we? If she's properly registered we should have her photograph and thumb-print, I should think … Just a moment.'

Smith got to his feet and made his way to a door leading to an inner office. He left the door ajar and the

Major could hear whispering but could not make out what was being said. He looked around. Nothing in the office had changed since his first visit except that strips of brown paper had been pasted over the window as a precaution against flying glass-splinters. It was some time before Smith reappeared; when he did so he was wearing spectacles and carrying a file. The atmosphere in the office was stifling despite the fan thrashing away above his desk. He sat down and for a while studied the file suspiciously, occasionally making a clicking sound with his tongue. From time to time he lifted the paper-clip and twisted it in his ear like a key in a lock. At length he looked up and said sharply: 'What's your interest in this case, Major?'

'She's a friend of mine …'

'I believe we've discussed this woman before, haven't we? I told you she wasn't reliable, perhaps even a whore. Surely now you don't mean to tell me that she's a friend of yours!'

'Even if your evil-minded suggestions were true,' replied the Major coldly, 'it would be no reason to refuse her an exit permit when her life is in danger if she remains in Singapore.'

Smith had once more dropped his eyes to the file and was champing his lips in a disagreeable manner. How little had changed, the Major reflected, since the first time he had sat in this office! Smith was still blinking and sweating profusely: wisps of hair still flickered on each side of his bald crown like electric sparks, dancing weirdly in the draught of the fan. The Major had been too busy fire-fighting to give much thought to earlier days when his Civil Defence Committee had lobbied the various departments of the Government for distribution of gasmasks and for air-raid shelters in the populous quarters of the city. But now his sense of frustration with petty officials returned in full force, combined with bitterness at the results of their ineptitude which he had witnessed in the last few days driving about in the defenceless, shelterless city.

'This woman once had connections with the General Labour Union,' pursued Smith, unaware of the Major's anger. 'I suppose you know that that was a Communist organization?'

The Major said nothing. Outside the air-raid sirens yet again began their rise and fall, rise and fall. Smith cocked an ear anxiously to them, then went on: 'We have information that she was also implicated in some criminal affair in Shanghai before the war in which a Japanese officer was killed. That was also Communist-inspired without doubt. So you see …'

'I see nothing except that she'll be on a Japanese black-list if she remains in Singapore!' shouted the Major, losing his temper.

'Don't raise your voice with me, Major,' said Smith nastily. 'You'll find that it doesn't get you anywhere.'

'From the way you talk it sounds as if you're on the side of the Japanese. Let me remind you that they and not the Chinese are the enemy!'

'Look here, old man,' said Smith in a condescending tone. 'I happen to know a great deal more about this business than you do. Of course, the Japs are the enemy, of course they are! But that doesn't mean the Chinese are on our side, particularly the Communists. You don't know, as I do, how dangerous they are to the fabric of our society. Well, they're like … I always say … hookworms in the body. They don't respect the natural boundaries of the organs … They pass from one to another …'

'So you said before. But I want an exit permit for that young woman and I don't mean to leave without one.'

'Out of the question, old man. Here in Singapore we have the Communists isolated and under control. We can't allow them to spread all over the place. The way I describe it, which many people have been kind enough to find illuminating, is that they're like millions of seeds in a pod. If we allow that pod to burst in India, say, or even in Australia, why, they'll be scattered all over the Empire in no time … Oh Lord!' he added hurrying to the window and throwing it open. 'It looks as if they're coming this way. We'd better go down to the shelter.'

The Major joined him at the window. The office was on the top floor of the building and looked eastwards over the city towards the sea. At this hour the stretch of water between Anderson Bridge and the horizon was a delicate duck-egg blue, extraordinarily beautiful. The Major, however, was looking up at the minute formation of silver-black planes flying towards the city at a great height. As the bombers passed over Kallang little white puffs began to appear in the sky beneath them, as if dotted here and there with an invisible paint-brush. After a moment the thud of guns came to them at the window. 'Yes, they do seem to be coming this way,' he agreed.

'Well, we'll have to continue this chat another time.' Smith picked up the file, snapped it shut and clamped it under his arm very firmly, as if he expected the Major to snatch it from him. He eyed the Major warily, his head on one side.

The Major was surprised to hear himself say: 'I'm not leaving this office without that exit permit and neither are you.' He advanced on Smith threateningly, sensing that despite his advantage of years Smith was afraid of him; perhaps Smith sensed how deeply angry and resentful the Major was after the days he had spent working in the chaotic streets. The Major gripped the back of a chair and Smith fell back a pace. Outside an alarm-bell jangled.

'That's the roof-spotter,' cried Smith in alarm. 'Look, be sensible. I don't even have the proper forms here. You must come back later, come back some other time.'

'Just write it out on official paper, sign it and stamp it!' The Major advanced a step. 'I've had about enough of this,' he added, taking off his jacket. 'Put up your fists.'

'What d'you mean?' asked Smith, staring at him in amazement.

'I mean I'm going to give you a punch on the nose,' replied the Major.

'This is absurd,' muttered Smith. He had turned very pale. Tufts of hair continued to flutter above his ears. A hideous whistling sound had begun from outside; it grew higher and higher in pitch, ending in an explosion that shook the building. 'Don't be ridiculous,' said Smith, ringing the bell on his desk sharply. But nothing happened. Evidently the people in the next office had departed to the shelter by another exit.

'Now look here …' said Smith, making for the door and delivering the Major a paralysing hack on the shins as he passed. But the Major caught him by the arm and yanked him back into the room. 'Just a minute,' he said. 'Put up your fists.'

'At least let me take off my glasses,' said Smith, giving the Major another mighty hack on the shins and punching him in the stomach for good measure.

'I'm afraid you've gone too far,' gasped the Major and, glasses or no glasses, drew back his first. But before he could strike, Smith was at his desk, writing busily.

'Why didn't you tell me straight away that she was your tart?' he demanded in an aggrieved tone. 'For chaps' tarts we can make exceptions.'

Smith had finished writing. The Major picked up the paper, read it carefully and put it in his pocket. 'One more thing. If I hear you've done anything to countermand this …'

But Smith had already fled for safety from the bombs and from the Major.

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The first week of February was a week of frantic activity for General Percival. Such was the swiftness with which the Japanese had followed up their attacks throughout the campaign that he knew he could not count on more than a week's grace before they launched their attack on Singapore Island itself. There was so much to be done, so little time in which to do it. He no longer even returned to Flagstaff House to sleep. Instead he would stretch out in his office at Command Headquarters in Sime Road and, within a few moments, would find himself plunging into a torrent of anxieties even more distressing than those he had to face while awake. And so, tired though he was, he preferred to remain conscious, taking cover in his work as if in a fortified position.

Moreover, he now sometimes had the impression that his luck was about to change, that the unseen hand had ceased to wield its influence over his affairs. For if you looked at matters objectively you would see immediately that the situation could have been a great deal worse. After all, was it not the case that the major part of his forces from the mainland had withdrawn unscathed across the Causeway and had been redeployed successfully to their defensive positions on the Island? They were there now, digging in as best they could under the shells which had started coming over the water from Johore. True, the 22nd Brigade had been lost, apart from a few stragglers who had managed to find their way across the Strait in small boats or who had been picked up at night by what was left of the Navy. On the other hand, the remainder of the (British) 18th Division was due to arrive on the 5th. It was Percival's belief that it would arrive just in the nick of time.

Singapore Island in shape somewhat resembled the head of an elephant lumbering towards you, with both its flapping ears outstretched and with Singapore Town about where the mouth would be. On the extreme tip of the elephant's left ear (on the east coast, that is) were the great fixed guns of the Johore and Changi batteries. On the other ear there was Tengah airfield and the coastline of creeks and mangrove swamps. As it happened, neither ear was now of very much use to Percival. Tengah was within easy range of observed artillery fire from the mainland and could no longer be used by the few remaining Hurricanes, detained on the Island for the purposes of morale and for the escorting of the last convoys: they now had to use the civil aerodrome at Kallang. As for those enormous, leopard-striped fifteen-inch guns at Changi which had contributed so much to Singapore's reputation as a fortress, they had been sited to deal with an attack by ships from the sea, although some of them could indeed be traversed to fire into Johore; their ammunition (in short supply, incidentally) since it was armour-piercing, was also intended for use against ships and was expected to bury itself too deeply to be effective against targets on land.

No, although the ears must also, of course, be defended against an enemy landing, it was really the head itself that mattered, for it was in this central part of the Island that everything of importance was located. On the crown of the elephant's head the Island was (or rather, had been) joined to the mainland by the Causeway which was a little over a thousand yards in length. When the last of the Argylls, who had been given the risky job of covering the withdrawal, had crossed safely back to the Island a considerable hole had been blown in the Causeway … or so it had seemed at first. Percival had been quite pleased with it, seeing the water flowing through at such a speed. But after a while even the hole had proved a disappointment, for what he had seen at first was the hole at *high tide* … at low tide it was a different story. It no longer looked as if it would provide such an effective obstacle. Still, it was a great deal better than no hole at all.

The important road which, in normal times, came over on the Causeway and landed on the crown of the elephant's head continued straight down towards its mouth and trunk where Singapore Town was … that, is in a southerly direction, more or less. Two-thirds of the way across, it reached Bukit Timah Village, thereafter

calling itself the Bukit Timah Road for the last lap into the city itself.

This principal road across the Island was straddled by not very impressive hills: Bukit (which means 'hill') Mandai, Bukit Panjang, Bukit Timah and Bukit Brown, the only hill terrain on the Island, by a nondescript area called Sleepy Valley, by a race course, a golf club and a cemetery (the latter on Bukit Brown), all grouped around Command Headquarters in Sime Road where Percival was now swatting at flies which were relentlessly trying to land on the backs of his sweating hands as he pored over the maps.

A little further to the east, right between the beast's eyes, lay the reservoirs which would become vital if the siege were prolonged, and, further east again, the pumping station at Woodleigh. Apart from the water in the reservoirs, great stocks of food retrieved from the mainland had been dumped on the race course. Beside the race course two large petrol dumps had been established, not to mention other food, petrol and ammunition dumps which were located in the Bukit Timah area. Yes, altogether this was an area that Percival knew he must defend at all costs. But then, 'at all costs' was how he would have had to defend it, anyway, since Singapore Town was only just down the road.

In the plans which had been laid for the defence of the Island it had been decided that if the worst came to the worst and the Japanese got a solid footing ashore, the eastern and western areas (the elephant's ears) might *à la rigueur* be abandoned and that the forces defending them might withdraw to second lines of defence. These second lines of defence, known as 'switch lines', followed very roughly the sides of the elephant's head where the ears were stuck on to it: on the eastern side the 'switch line' was obliged to bulge out a bit from the side of the head in order to include Kallang aerodrome; also, the big guns at Changi would have to be abandoned. On the western side the 'switch line' was particularly easy to define, thanks to two rivers or creeks, the Jurong and the Kranji, which flowed north and south respectively just where the ear joined the skull. It was simply, then, a question of joining one creek to the other with a defensive line from north to south across the Island to isolate the western ear completely. Nothing could be simpler.

This 'switch line', known as the 'Jurong line', was accordingly reconnoitred but no effort was made to install fixed defences. This was for two reasons. One was that the troops were already frantically digging themselves in around the northern coast in order to prepare for the Japanese attack across the Strait of Johore and did not have time. The other was that Percival did not really think that the Japanese would come that way. He was pretty well convinced that they would attack somewhere along the top of the other (eastern) ear between Changi and Seletar.

Percival considered that the Japanese attack would fall on the north-east coast of the Island partly because Wavell, when they had discussed the prospect a couple of weeks earlier, had taken a different view: Wavell thought it would fall on the north-western. Nor was Wavell the only one: Brigadier Simson, the DGCD, clearly thought so, too, because he or his Deputy Chief Engineer had been dumping quantities of defensive material west of the Causeway on their own initiative. Ever since December it had been piling up: booby-traps, barbed wire, high-tensile anti-tank wire, even drums of petrol with which to set fire to the water surface and searchlights to illuminate it at every possible landing site. He had even dumped anti-tank cylinders, blocks and chains by the sides of the roads. No doubt Simson meant well. The fact remained that, in Percival's view, he had the makings of a confounded nuisance. Ever since he had arrived he had been demanding that fixed defences should be built on the north shore of the Island. He simply had not wanted to realize what such defences would have done to the morale of the troops fighting up-country, or of the civilians either, come to that. Simson's latest was to start stripping the headlights off cars to augment his searchlights! The Governor, however, had soon put a stop to that. He himself, aware that there would no longer be much time left to prepare for the Japanese assault, had seen to it that the defensive material was shifted from west to east of the Causeway where, he was pretty sure, it would be needed.

Tormented by flies, light-headed from lack of sleep, Percival sat in his office at Sime Road, brooding over his maps and listening to the distant, monotonous thudding of the guns. The Japanese had wasted no time in moving up their heavy artillery, they were good soldiers, there was no denying it. Now they were laying down a heavy bombardment of the northern coast … particularly, as it happened, *west* of the Causeway. Ah, but Percival was not about to be fooled into thinking that that was where the attack would come! To bombard one sector and attack another was the oldest trick in the game. There was something almost pleasant, he found, in this constant thudding of guns, which included his own artillery shelling Johore and the hammering of ack-ack guns … it reminded him curiously of his youth, of the endless artillery exchanges of the Great War. Terrible though that had been, it now seemed almost a pleasant memory. He thought for a moment of mentioning it to Brookers … he, too, would have enjoyed the reminiscence. But then he remembered that Brooke-Popham had already returned to England. Just as well, really. The old chap was no longer quite up to this sort of thing.

It occurred to Percival that what had gone wrong in the campaign until now was that he had never been able to act *positively*. Time and again he had been obliged to react. Thanks to Brooke-Popham's hesitations the Japanese commander had taken the initiative from the beginning and had never let it go. True, he himself had been the victim of the most extraordinary (indeed, suspicious) series of misfortunes. But the fact was that that unseen hand had led him by the nose. When Wavell had expressed the opinion that a Japanese attack would fall west of the Causeway, when, independently, it seemed, the Chief Engineer had started dumping material west of the Causeway, how easy it would have been to have made the assumption that this was where the

attack *would* fall! But something inside him had rebelled. He had sensed that once again that unseen hand was trying to lead him by the nose. He had told himself: 'Be objective!' And so he had cleared his mind of prejudices and looked at the map again, asking himself what he would have done if he had been the Japanese commander. The answer was: he would have launched his attack on the north-east coast using Pulau Ubin, the long island which lay in the Strait of Johore, to shield his preparations from the view of Singapore Island. Accordingly, Percival had allotted to the recently arrived British troops of the 18th Division whose morale had not been dented in the long retreat down the Peninsula the sector which he considered most critical… though the whole of the northern coast must be defended, of course.

There was, however, still the possibility that he was wrong in expecting the Japanese attack to fall east of the Causeway. The Intelligence wallahs in Fort Canning, for example, were predicting an attack to the west. But what did they know about it? They knew no more than he did: they had no reconnaissance planes to help them. All the same, to be on the safe side, he had ordered Gordon Bennett to send over night patrols to the mainland to get a better idea of what the Japanese were up to. Bennett had been dragging his feet over this. He would have to give him some plain speaking.

He reached out for some papers on his desk and as he picked them up a photograph fell out of them: they were private papers of no great importance which he had brought with him from Flagstaff House with the intention of having them destroyed. The photograph, by a coincidence, was of Gordon Bennett and himself standing, by the look of it, outside Flagstaff House. They were both 'at ease', identically dressed except that Bennett was wearing a short-sleeved shirt while he himself had rolled his sleeves up to the elbow. But what struck Percival now was the difference of expression on their faces: while he himself was smiling pleasantly at the camera, Bennett, a short, plump fellow whose belt encircled a by no means negligible corporation, standing a few inches further back, was looking disaffected, was even glancing at him sideways out of the corner of his eye in a manner which could almost have been contemptuous. But perhaps he was simply imagining it… photographs are notorious for giving the wrong impression, for catching people with misleading expressions on their faces. Still, he had to admit that he no longer had the confidence in Bennett that he had once had. While many of the Australian troops had fought heroically and effectively, Bennett as their leader had proved a liability. Altogether Percival was glad that Bennett would be covering the north-western area which was least likely to be attacked.

Presently Percival's thoughts were interrupted by the GSO1 on duty in the War Room, and not with good news. An urgent message had come through from Kallang aerodrome by way of the RAF staff: one of the convoy of four ships transporting the remaining units of the British 18th Division, the *Empress of Asia*, had fallen behind the other three and had not managed, under cover of darkness, to reach the (relatively) safe umbrella of Singapore's air defences. She had been attacked by dive-bombers off the Sembilan Islands and was in danger of sinking. Efforts were being made by the Navy to rescue survivors.

For some moments, while he considered this news, Percival was speechless. He had been so confident that the unseen hand would play no further part in his affairs … and now this! He had been counting on the 18th Division arriving intact. At length, however, he collected himself and said mechanically to the GSO1: 'We must count ourselves lucky that that's the only ship we've lost.' Then, becoming brisk, he turned to other business. There was still a great deal to be done. He wanted to know in particular what progress was being made with the demolition of plant at the Naval Base; almost unbelievably, it seemed to him, Naval personnel had decamped to Ceylon on Admiralty orders, without even bothering to inform him that this demolition would have to be undertaken by his own hard-pressed troops.

A little later there was further news of the *Empress of Asia*: although both the liner herself and the equipment she was carrying had been destroyed, the loss of life had been small. This undoubtedly was a good omen: Percival immediately summoned his driver and had himself conveyed to the docks to greet the survivors. True, they would not be much help without their equipment, which had included anti-tank guns (if only there had been more of those at the Slim River!) but it was still a step in the right direction. And every able-bodied man might prove useful in the end, provided there was sufficient time to establish satisfactory defences.

Then, however, an even more disturbing piece of news reached him; at last, on 7 February, Bennett had seen his way to sending the night-patrols he had asked for over to the mainland. On their return they had brought the dismaying report that Japanese troops were concentrating opposite the north-*western* sector. Could it be, Percival wondered, that his prediction was wrong?

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In the first days of February it seemed to Matthew that the dock buildings were permanently ablaze. There the Mayfair unit would be sent whenever there were no fires to deal with in their own district, and so frequently did this occur that presently it became almost a ritual: they would report to Adamson and set into a hydrant, or if there were no hydrant, drop their suction hose into the filthy water of the dock itself and start up the pumps. No matter when they arrived, or where, it seemed that it was always Adamson who was in charge of the fire they had been sent to. It was a mystery when he found time to sleep. He would emerge from the

drifting smoke, never in a hurry, strolling almost, as if perfectly remote from the fire raging close at hand.

At some time in the past few days Adamson had acquired a dog, a black and white sheepdog which had mysteriously adopted him at one of the fires he had attended and which added to his air of detachment. Very often when the Mayfair party arrived the dog would appear first out of the smoke, would examine them, sniffing and wagging its tail, and then disappear into the smoke again, returning presently with Adamson. Then Adamson would briefly explain the nature of the fire to the Major and the plan for fighting, or at least containing it … for the bombs which caused the fires continued to fall with ritual precision, day after day, very often at ten or eleven o'clock in the morning and again in the afternoon, but always more rapidly than the fires, death and destruction which they brought about could be dealt with. The truth was that although the staff at the Central Fire Station in Hill Street continued to map the new outbreaks as best they could, there were likely to be as many 'unofficial' fires burning briskly in the docks or elsewhere in the city as those which had been reported and mapped. But somehow Adamson and his dog found out about these fires, sifted them and matched them against the pumps and fire-engines available, deciding which were the least dangerous and could be left to burn, and which had to be stopped then and there.

Once or twice, when the Major happened on an unattended fire on his way to the docks, he anxiously sought out Adamson to report it, only to find out that Adamson already knew about it. 'Let it burn, Major,' he would say with a curious, ironic smile and then go on to explain in his casual manner where the Mayfair pumps might come in useful. At times Adamson was to be seen in a jeep he had found somewhere, manoeuvring in and out of the piles of rubble and masonry that lay in the streets, while the black and white dog sat up on the seat beside him looking around with keen interest as if ready to alert his companion to any new fire that broke out. But more often, because of the dense traffic of military vehicles unloading equipment and trying to move food stores from the threatened godowns to some safer location in the city, Adamson and his dog moved about on foot. Matthew, in particular, watched them with keen interest.

Despite his weariness, the hectic life he was leading, the constant danger, and his worries lest Vera should be trapped in Singapore, Matthew had not ceased to feel that novel sense of fulfilment which he had first experienced at the timber-yard fire. The satisfaction of doing something practical, the results of which were visible and practical, in the company of friends seemed to him so powerful that he was amazed that he should never have considered it before. While he had been cudgelling his brains with the question: 'What is the best way in which to live one's life?' with no other result than that a substantial part of that life had gone by in the process, the answer had been all around him, being demonstrated by the most ordinary of people.

Watching Adamson and his dog, calm but determined, going about their business, Matthew thought: 'Surely there are people like this all over the world, in every country, in every society in every class or caste or community! People who simply go about doing the things that have to be done, not just for themselves but for everybody.' Such people, whether they were Socialists, or Capitalists, or Communists, or paid no attention to politics at all, because they were entirely committed to whatever job it was they were doing were bound to be the very backbone of their society; without them people like himself who spent their days in speculation and dispute could scarcely expect to survive. Matthew was anxious to know Adamson's thoughts, to know whether he had consciously decided to behave in the way he did. But he found it difficult to corner Adamson and even more difficult to get him to say what he thought about anything. He would merely answer with a smile or a shrug when Matthew tried to sound him out on some political question. Once he admitted reluctantly in reply to Matthew's question that, after the war, if he got back to Britain, he would vote for a Labour Government 'to change all this' and he gestured vaguely with a stick at the smouldering warehouses around them. After a moment's silent reflection he added: 'I read somewhere that the boatman who rowed King William back across the river after the Battle of the Boyne is supposed to have asked the King which side won … To which the King replied: "What's it to you? You'll still be a boatman."' Matthew had to be satisfied with this.

In the course of the past few days Adamson had hurt his foot and now limped rather, but he still managed to convey the impression that he was merely out for a stroll among the burning buildings; his casual air was increased by the fact that he had taken to carrying a walking stick he had picked up somewhere. Once Matthew came upon him unexpectedly. Not far from one of the dock gates there was a sad little parcel of tattered clothing and personal odds and ends, abandoned by someone unable to carry them in the stampede to reach one of the last ships to leave. Other similarly abandoned suitcases had in the meantime vanished or been rifled of their contents. Now Adamson, leaning on his stick, was contemplating a battered old hairbrush with bristles splayed by use, a sponge-bag, a couple of books including a child's picture-book, what might have been a cotton dress or apron and several other indeterminate pieces of cloth or clothing. He continued to gaze at these things for a moment with raised eyebrows and a grim expression on his face; then he limped on, swiping with his stick at a tennis ball he saw in the gutter with a shoe and one or two other things. The dog, which had come back to see what was the matter, went racing off again to seek out more fires. Matthew would remember for a long time to come that bitter, ironic expression he had glimpsed on Adamson's face as he limped away down the empty street after the dog which had already disappeared into the rolling smoke.

But already the Mayfair unit had gained so much experience that its members depended less and less on Adamson's advice and directions. The Major himself had become a hardened fireman and no longer would have dreamed of taking the risks he had taken in the beginning. Not that fire-fighting had become any less dangerous. Quite apart from the heavy carpet-bombing raids by gigantic formations of bombers (still in

multiples of twenty-seven) which continued and intensified in the first week of February, now lone fighter-aircraft would appear suddenly out of nowhere, zooming up and down the main thoroughfares of the city and machine-gunning anything that moved, even rickshaws or Cold Storage 'stop-me-and-buy-one' tricycles … one day they passed an overturned tricycle with a Chinese youth beside it, his brains spilling into a pool of milk or ice-cream in the road. Anywhere, coming and going to fires, you might suddenly have come upon a row of bodies stretched out on the pavement following the appearance of one of these aircraft.

The city of Singapore which, in unison with the rise of Blackett and Webb, had grown from a small settlement into the greatest trading port of the Far East had been the home of something over half a million people in peacetime. Now in the space of a few weeks the population had suddenly doubled to over a million as refugees poured across the Causeway from up-country. By the time a hole had at last been blown in the Causeway and the flow of refugees had dried up, the Island, and Singapore Town in particular, was swarming with people who had nowhere to go. From now on, almost everywhere you went you would see people with suitcases or bundles sitting by the roadside in whatever shade they could find, under trees or on the pavements of covered ways, clustering around water-taps or begging food from passers-by. To Matthew and the Major and even to Dupigny who had spent so many years in the swarming cities of the East, this sudden increase in Singapore's population was quite unnerving. Among these aimless crowds of refugees they themselves felt a loss of identity and purpose. They felt themselves losing their accustomed rank as Europeans, their special status, in that great, amorphous, anonymous herd of humanity trapped there in a burning city and unable any longer to exert any control over its own destiny.

Even after the demolition of the Causeway more refugees still continued to appear in Singapore Town, evacuated from the northern part of the Island by the Military who were preparing their defences. From the beginning of February a curfew from nine p.m. to five a.m. had been in force, but you cannot confine people to their houses if they have no houses to go to; it was not very long before the city's population, abnormally swollen by refugees and demoralized troops, had begun to show signs of getting out of control. The first sporadic cases of looting occurred in bombed-out districts. Rumours of the excesses of undisciplined troops, for the most part Australian, circulated among the alarmed Europeans: someone had had his car hijacked at gun-point-by drunken soldiers carousing with prostitutes from Lavender Road, and someone else had heard of a rape of English nurses on waste land near the biscuit factory. This sudden collapse, which you could almost feel in the air, of *normal standards of behaviour* was the most frightening thing of all, more frightening even than the Japanese bombers. As a result, anyone who had still hesitated over leaving, and who had permission to do so, now made up his mind.

Thanks to the Major's influence at the Chinese Protectorate, Matthew had at last succeeded, after more anxious hours of waiting, in having Vera's name registered at the P & O's temporary office in Cluny Road. But Vera, though she had seemed in mortal fear of the Japanese while they were still hundreds of miles away in the north, now that they had come to within a few miles, and could even be seen with the naked eye (so one of the transient officers at the Mayfair asserted) strutting on the sea front at Johore Bahru, had grown calm and apparently resigned. When every day, Matthew telephoned the P & O to find out if there were any ships sailing and, again every day, he received a negative answer she did not seem to be particularly disappointed. She merely shrugged her shoulders and smiled. In any case, he had less opportunity to see her now. While most of his waking hours were spent at fires, Vera had taken to working equally long hours as a volunteer nurse at one of the makeshift hospitals which had sprung up on the fringes of Chinatown to cope with the steadily increasing civilian casualties. Matthew continued doggedly to telephone the P & O, however. He was determined that she should not be in Singapore when the Japanese arrived. But would there be any more ships leaving? So the first week of February came to an end.

They slept side by side. Matthew was dreaming deeply, anxiously about Geneva. Things would go terribly wrong unless he was careful: he knew that Vera's life would be at stake unless he could persuade someone of something, whom and of what was not clear. He uttered a shout, waking himself up. But no, someone was there, hammering against the wall, telling him to wake up. He sat up immediately in the stifling darkness. He could see someone standing there in the faint glow from under the rolled-up bamboo window blinds, and he thought: 'They *have* come to arrest her, after all.'

'Sorry, I think you were having a nightmare,' said a familiar voice. It was the Major. He wanted to say that someone in the Control Room in Hill Street had told him that a Free French ship, the *Félix Roussel*, was due to sail for Bombay in a few hours and anyone who wanted to sail on her was advised to reserve a passage without delay. The P & O office was already besieged. There was no time to waste.

The following morning a cheerful crowd sat amid the jumble of mattresses and chairs in the Mayfair. Everything had at last been arranged. Matthew, jubilant, sat reading again and again the printed instructions they had been given at the P & O office. Vera was to report to Collyer Quay at eight o'clock that evening, bringing only what luggage she could carry herself. Matthew had been given a pass which would allow him to drive home after seeing her off, which would necessarily be after the curfew. As for Vera, though she smiled from time to time, she said nothing. Matthew was puzzled by her calm. Was she upset by the prospect of finding herself alone in Bombay?

'A little,' Vera agreed. 'But no, not really.' She had been used to this sort of thing from childhood, being uprooted from one place after another.

‘You’ve got the address of the Hong Kong and Shanghai Bank, haven’t you?’ Matthew asked anxiously, not for the first time. ‘It’s in Churchgate Street. I’ll write to you there and join you when I can.’ Vera smiled again and squeezed his hand. Matthew suspected that she still did not really believe she would get away from Singapore.

While they sat around talking they were startled by a whirring sound like a great bird passing over the house, followed by an explosion, perhaps a quarter of a mile away.

‘I didn’t hear the sirens, did you?’ They stared at each other in surprise. Only the Major knew immediately what had caused the explosion. He had heard that sort of noise before. He sighed but said nothing, bending his ear politely to listen to what his neighbour was saying. This man, a purple-faced planter from the Kuala Lumpur area, was one of the many refugees who had wandered in unannounced, having heard somewhere that there was shelter to be found at the Mayfair; he had brought several bottles of whisky with which he fortified himself at intervals, waving a roll of paper. On this roll of paper, he said, were the plans of a new type of anti-aircraft gun he had invented in the long evenings on his estate. It would fire twice as high as anything they had at present. He had written to General Percival about it but his letter had gone unanswered. ‘Save the whole of Singapore, old boy,’ he was now explaining huskily to the Major. ‘But the blighters won’t look at it… Save the British Empire, come to that!’ And he waved his blueprint despondently.

Again there came that whirring, whistling sound, followed by another explosion, more distant this time.

‘What on earth is it?’

‘I’m afraid they’ve started shelling us now,’ said the Major. ‘They must have moved up some heavier guns to reach this side of the Island.’ He felt a sudden compulsion to jump to his feet and start walking about, because if you kept on the move … well, more than once in the trenches in the First War a shell had exploded where he had been sitting or standing a moment before. Nevertheless, he obliged himself to sit still, staring somewhat glassily at Matthew and Vera opposite him. He did not want to start all that again at his age! It had taken him years after the war to get over this compulsion to be always on the move. How many years had he not spent with invisible shells exploding in dining-rooms and drawing-rooms he had just vacated!

‘At this range they’ll only be able to send over the small stuff,’ he added, lighting his pipe.

‘The Major means that if you are lucky you will only be hit by a small shell,’ observed Dupigny wryly from the doorway.

‘Ah, François! I suppose you know there’s a French ship sailing tonight for Bombay? Will you be aboard?’

Dupigny shook his head. ‘I shall stay a little longer, I think.

‘This may be your last chance.’

Dupigny, however, merely shrugged.

‘I saw Walter a little while ago. He said that Joan and Nigel would be leaving tonight. They’re to be married in Bombay and then go to Australia to join the others as soon as they can … Joan would have left the other day but could not get on the boat. It seems that …’ The Major paused. Matthew, with his finger to his lips, was signalling in the direction of Ehrendorf who lay sprawled on a mattress at the far end of the room with a folded newspaper over his head.

‘What are you going to do about this poor fellow?’ Matthew asked in order to change the subject.

Each shell that had exploded had produced a groan from beneath an elegant lacquered writing-desk which supported a field-telephone ‘for emergencies’ which no one could get to work and an ordinary telephone, as well as several other things. Presently the author of the groan crept out and went to slump down under the Major’s chair. With his refined sense of imminent danger The Human Condition had evidently sensed that these strange new explosions boded ill for his chances of survival.

‘I’m afraid I’ll have to take him to the vet this evening. We may as well bring him along at the same time as you go to the boat, poor creature.’ At these words The Human Condition rolled his eyeballs up to the Major’s face and uttered a piteous whine, licking the Major’s hand at the same time.

‘I think that dog must be rotting internally,’ remarked Dupigny objectively.

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Ehrendorf made his way, carrying a towel and swimming trunks, towards the Blacketts’ compound, lingering for a moment among the exotic blooms which glowed like lamps amid the dark leaves. For a while he watched the butterflies which still swooped and fluttered in this little glade, impervious to the bombs that had fallen round about. Then, with a melancholy sigh which was partly counterfeit because he was now seeing himself as the ill-starred hero of his novel in its first version (innocent American abused by cynical Europeans), he moved on in the direction of the swimming pool.

Although he had paid a brief visit to Walter by darkness the other evening, it was several weeks since Ehrendorf had last seen the Blacketts’ house by daylight. It seemed to him to have a forlorn and deserted air. During the raid on Tanglin a bomb had fallen at one edge of the lawn, uprooting the ‘flame of the forest’ tree beneath which, several months ago, he had been standing with Joan when she had thrown wine in his face at the garden-party. No effort had been made to fill in the crater on whose raised lip the grass lawn continued peacefully to grow; in the façade of the house itself several of the windows which had once been glazed for

the air-conditioning now gaped darkly where once they had sparkled with reflections from the pool.

He plodded past the tennis courts whose white lines, washed out by the monsoon rains and not repainted, were by now scarcely visible. Normally, too, there would have been several Tamils working in the flower-beds or cutting back the *lalang* but today he could not see a soul. He paused to stare uncomprehendingly at an untidy mass of broken spars and tattered paper which stood at the margin of the nutmeg grove and which he failed to recognize as the remains of damaged floats for the jubilee celebrations. Can Walter and Joan have left already? he wondered and, resigned though he already was to the fact that he was unlikely ever to see Joan again, he was nevertheless surprised by the intense and chilling sadness which suddenly enveloped him.

The summer-house, in which the Blacketts in happier times had invited their guests to change their clothes, remained undamaged; Ehrendorf changed rapidly and plunged into the pool which was full of dead leaves and other flotsam. He dived and swam under water for a few feet but the water was murky and disagreeable. How different everything was! Surfacing he bumped into a piece of floating wood on which the words '… in Prosperity' were written. He took a deep breath and dived again; this time he dragged himself on and on through the silent grey corridors, counting the grey tiles on the bottom, inspecting weird grey objects which lay there: a broken flowerpot from which still trailed a slimy grey plant which wavered slightly at his passage, a brick, a rusting metal golf club, a slimy, swollen, disintegrating grey head, horribly merry, which had once belonged to one of the floats and which he also failed to recognize. He would have liked to drag himself on and on through that grey world but his lungs insisted that he should return to the surface. Shaking the water out of his eyes he saw that Joan was walking rapidly towards the pool. Her face was flushed and agitated.

'Oh, hiya. I hope you don't mind me using the pool. I didn't see anyone around. I thought you'd all gone.' He was aware of an extraordinary stiffness of the muscles of his face as he spoke.

Joan had stopped at the edge of the pool and was gazing down at him with an odd expression on her face, restlessly fingering the turban she was wearing. She ignored his greeting, turned away, looked at her watch, turned back to him. At last she said: 'You must help me get to the boat. I've been trying to ring people but everyone else has gone. There's only Abdul here and he's too old … They say there's already a terrible traffic jam beginning … All the "boys" have cleared off, even the kitchen "boy", and Father has gone off somewhere … and Monty, I don't know where he is … Nigel had to go and settle some business at the last moment and I'm to meet him at the boat but unless you help me … You see, they've all gone! Father was supposed to be back ages ago to take me down to the docks himself, but even the *syce* isn't there and it's getting late … Jim, I can't manage the luggage by myself, d'you see? Oh, go away! You're completely useless!' she screamed at Abdul suddenly for the elderly servant had followed her out on to the lawn and was rubbing his hands anxiously. Shocked, he fell back a few paces but continued to watch Joan.

Ehrendorf had turned over on to his back and was no longer looking at Joan but straight up at the sky which was cloudless though covered with a white haze. Floating with arms and legs outstretched he thought: 'From above I must look as if I'm floating like a star-fish … or perhaps like a piece of flotsam.' In spite of the water bubbling in his ears he could still hear Joan's voice, though quite faintly now. He could tell from its pitch that she was panic-stricken. And this was the girl who had refused to help Matthew get Vera away! He said to himself, floating placidly: 'I wouldn't help her even if my life depended upon it!'

When he turned over to swim to the side he could no longer hear her voice, but she was still there, kneeling in tears of rage at the side of the pool, hammering at it with a piece of broken wood. As he gripped the rounded lip of the pool and heaved himself out of the water he glanced at her, musing on the wonder of a beautiful woman with a disagreeable personality. Such a woman, he mused, was like a lovely schooner with a mad captain. The custodian of this lovely body was a hardhearted bitch. It was altogether astonishing.

'Of course I'll help you,' he said. 'Just wait a moment while I get changed.

Mr Wu's Buick, which had been under repair for some days, was now on the road again and heading towards Wilkie Street where The Human Condition was to be left at the vet's *en route* to Collyer's Quay. The dog sat on the front seat and stared out uneasily at the darkening streets. But when they reached Wilkie Street they found a large crowd of harrowed-looking people grasping dogs, cats and birds of all shapes and sizes already waiting. It seemed that these doomed creatures had sensed the anguish of their owners, too, for they were setting up the most distressing din of shrieking, whining, miaouwing, barking and piping. The Major had no appetite for this and said: 'We'll call on the way back from the boat. There won't be anyone there after the curfew. Besides, we'd better not waste any time.' The Human Condition, who had been staring with dismay at this frantic queue of fellow-victims, uttered a heart-rending groan. For how long had he been reprieved?

When they reached Collyer's Quay they were thankful that they had not delayed any longer for already the quay itself and the surrounding area was jammed with cars full of anxious people. Holding the paper that Vera had been given at Cluny Matthew plunged into the crowd of people trying to get tickets and embarkation instructions. He was gone for a long time; meanwhile the traffic jam around them had worsened considerably. When he at last returned he had Vera's ticket but he was looking worried: he explained that they still had to drive to the P & O wharf some three miles away and the traffic by now was scarcely moving. To make matters worse, passengers were only allowed to board the ship in groups which had been staggered alphabetically in order to prevent everybody arriving at the dock at the same time. Because Vera's surname began with C this

regulation should have worked to her advantage, but by some error the official who had taken her name, perhaps assuming that she had given her surname first in the Chinese fashion, had reversed her names and allotted her to the last group. In any case passengers were not arriving at intervals as had been expected and some of those who had arrived too early were being made to wait, blocking the quayside. Nevertheless, although the boarding arrangements were no longer achieving what had been expected of them and were, indeed, only adding to the confusion, they were still being rigidly adhered to by the authorities in charge of the embarkation.

'We should still make it all right. The boat doesn't sail till one o'clock. We can always walk if the worst comes to the worst.'

It took several minutes before there was even an opening that allowed them to pull into the line of traffic crawling along Collyer's Quay; then, for long stretches, they were obliged to stop altogether. Sometimes they discovered the reason for these delays, a car that had overheated or run out of petrol perhaps; then they would overtake a demented man peering at his engine in a cloud of steam, or a weeping woman sitting by herself with a pile of luggage, while those behind cursed and hooted at her to get her car out of the way.

'This is dreadful.' The Major's face grew increasingly grim as the minutes ticked by. Presently a whole hour had fled. They still had not reached the shell of the Sailor's Institute at the end of Anson Road.

'Perhaps they'll delay the time of sailing.' But this, Matthew knew, was unlikely for if the *Félix Roussel* was to escape the Japanese bombers she would have to be well on her way from Singapore before dawn.

For some time now they had been following a large open Bentley which contained a party of elegantly dressed young ladies sitting on pigskin suitcases plastered with gaily coloured steamer and hotel labels. Since it was already quite dark and all street-lights had been extinguished in accordance with the blackout regulations there only remained the Buick's papered-over headlights to cast a faint glow on the party travelling in front. But from time to time a match would flare as a cigarette was lit … (it appeared that the young ladies in the Bentley had no inhibitions about smoking in public) … then a cheerful little scene would be briefly illuminated, for to celebrate their departure from Singapore the ladies had brought two or three bottles of champagne and some glasses. And so, while another hour went by, the grim party from the Mayfair, with their doomed little dog sitting on the front seat, sat and watched the beautifully marcelled tresses in front of them and listened to the clink of glasses and the giggles, shrieks and popping of corks. Presently it occurred to the Major that there was something familiar about the Bentley.

'Isn't that one of Walter's cars?'

'I've been wondering the same thing. But what are those young women doing in it? There's something familiar about them, too. But it surely can't be Walter driving, nor his *syce* either, come to that.' The driver, whoever it was, remained invisible slumped far down in the seat in a manner which by contrast with the exuberance of his companions, was almost furtive.

'I have an idea it's that singing team,' said the Major, 'the Da Sousa Sisters … the girls Walter wanted to have in his jubilee procession. He must have arranged for someone to take them to the boat in his car.'

After a while, in support of this theory as to their identity the young women sitting on their luggage in the back of the Bentley put their marcelled heads together and their arms round each other's shoulders and began to sing:

Singapore, hulloa, hulloa!
In silk and satin and boa
We are the girlies from Goa!

The Major was too preoccupied, however, to be greatly concerned with the identity of some tipsy young women in Walter's car. He was more worried by the glowing clock on the dashboard (had it stopped or was it a quarter-past eleven already?). It was true that they had now almost reached the corner of Trafalgar Street but the nearer they came to the docks the slower their progress. Now increasingly they found themselves halted in the same place for several minutes at a time. The heat, the exhaust fumes and the ever-present drifting smoke from burning buildings made it hard to breathe. Vera lay with her head slumped against the back of the seat, her eyes closed. The minute hand on the dashboard crept on.

In the car ahead of them as time went on the gaiety of the Da Sousa Sisters was replaced by a rather sullen silence: evidently they, too, were becoming anxious about reaching the boat in time. Soon a squabble erupted and they began to scream, either at each other or at their driver, it was hard to say. Then they began to shriek abuse at the car in front of them which for some reason was being abandoned by its passengers. Eventually the Bentley managed to pull round it and the column advanced a few more yards. On the sea side of the road a warehouse which had been damaged in an earlier raid had been left to burn, casting a red glow over the line of cars ahead and bringing an intolerable increase in the temperature for some distance round about. It now became clear that a number of the cars ahead had been abandoned and were blocking the road beyond redemption.

'I think we'd better walk,' Matthew said. Vera said that she felt well enough to do so but it was obvious that the smoke, the heat and the fumes were making her feel ill.

'You go ahead,' the Major said. 'I'll see if I can get rid of the car and then come back and help.'

Matthew opened the door, threw out Vera's suitcase and helped her out into the road. As he was doing so The Human Condition suddenly sprang off the front seat into the darkness and vanished. 'Hey! Come back!' called the Major feebly, but this was no time to worry about a lost dog. Matthew picked up Vera's suitcase and, supporting her as best he could, set off with her into the flickering night. As they were passing the Bentley another squabble suddenly broke out between the young ladies and their driver. It was clear that they considered him to be responsible for the traffic jam in which they found themselves.

'You said you taking us to bloody boat!' they screamed. 'You damn well better take us to bloody-damn boat, OK!'

'Matthew!' called a despairing voice from the Bentley and Matthew stopped, peering at the car in astonishment, for there, slumped in the front seat, his face weirdly illuminated by the flickering light of the burning building nearby as if by infernal flames was Monty Blackett.

'I say, you couldn't give me a hand with some of this luggage, could you, old man? It's so heavy I can't manage it all. Go on, be a sport!'

'Impossible! I have all I can manage already.'

'Look here, Matthew, there's a good fellow,' pleaded Monty in a more confidential tone, 'these young ladies here, who are simply charming, by the way, will let us hide in their cabin till the boat has sailed, in return for helping them, I mean to say … We'll be in Bombay in two shakes and no one will be the wiser. And they'll probably let us have some fun with them into the bargain. It's our only chance. Don't be a chump! Singapore's done for! It's common knowledge. And I promised these girls that I'd get them on board, you know, and they'll be frightfully sticky if I don't! We just go on board saying we're helping them with their bags and stay there. Things are in such a mess that no one will know the difference!'

'Sorry, Monty, I can't help you. But you're nearly there. I'm sure you'll make it. Goodbye.'

While Monty had thus been pleading for help two of the Da Sousa Sisters, who had begun to pummel him and pull his hair in their indignation, had desisted and fixed their glittering, anthracite eyes on Matthew, allowing their victim to make this last appeal. In the meantime, other Da Sousa Sisters had come hopping forward over the suitcases to perch like leather-winged harpies on the back of the seat, on the door at his side, and even on the windscreen, clutching on with long red fingernails and staring down at him with their cruelly glittering eyes, one or two of them already beginning to dribble from scarlet-lipsticked mouths.

'Be a sport!' wailed Monty.

But Matthew was already on his way with Vera towards the distant P & O wharf. He looked back once, just in time to see Monty's flickering, terror-stricken features disappear under a tide of biting, scratching, hair-pulling Da Sousa Sisters. In a moment there was nothing to be seen but an inner circle of feeding marcelled heads and an outer circle of tight-skirted bottoms. 'Poor Monty!' thought Matthew. 'What a fate!' But he hurried on with Vera, for by now it was getting close to midnight and the *Félix Roussel* was due to sail in a little over an hour.

As they advanced they saw that the road was jammed, not only with empty cars but with all sorts of other objects as well. Clearly no one had taken seriously the instruction to bring only hand luggage. Household goods of all sorts had been abandoned with the cars that had been conveying them: tables, chairs, chests and boxes were to be seen strapped on to car roofs: rolled-up carpets poked through windows. In places, abandoned possessions had been disgorged into the road, which was gradually coming to take on the appearance of a nightmare furniture store: some of them had been dragged by their reluctant owners a little distance in the direction of the wharf; in other cases their owners had not yet been able to make up their minds to forsake them: here and there a man with bulging eyes and swelling veins could still be seen wrestling with some possession too precious to leave behind, a mahogany dining-table perhaps, or a set of carved Chinese chairs, while at his side his wife groaned under a heavy brass Buddha or some other such fearful fardel.

Matthew and Vera now began to find that the litter of furniture and packing-cases, trunks and suitcases had become so dense in places that there was nothing for it but to climb over. They found themselves having to squeeze between wardrobes or clamber over pianos, their path lit only by the distant light of burning buildings, now seeing themselves faintly reflected in long mirrors, now listening to the sobs and groans of shadowy figures on their knees by the wayside. On one dark stretch they found themselves crunching through a tea-set of finest bone china; in another, stopping to rest because Vera was tired, they groped their way to a chesterfield sofa and sat down on it without realizing that a man and his wife, one at each end, were still trying to trundle it towards the wharf.

At long last they began to near the dock gates and could even make out the funnels of the *Félix Roussel* silhouetted against the pink glow of the night. Suddenly a rickshaw loomed out of the darkness along Keppel Road in the jostling crowd that flowed towards Gate 3 and the Empire Dock. Matthew, astonished, just had time to glimpse Joan sitting in it amidst a pile of luggage while Ehrendorf, stripped to the waist and streaming with sweat, galloped onwards as best he could between the shafts. Unable, like Matthew and Vera, to get through in the car Ehrendorf had wanted to abandon it, but Joan had refused to leave her luggage, which included a number of valuable wedding-presents, a set of pewter mugs, bed-linen, material to be made up into curtains according to a colour scheme she had already devised for her first home, a canteen of solid silver and other things. What was to be done? Ehrendorf had happened to spot an abandoned rickshaw beside the road

and now here he was, head down and gasping for breath, scattering people right and left as he charged for the open gates.

'Darling! I was afraid you wouldn't get here in time,' cried a voice almost in Ehrendorf's ear. A pink-faced young man in a white linen suit and a trilby was addressing Joan. 'I have someone keeping me a place near the front. I say, who's this johnnie?' he added, noticing at length that there was something unusual about Joan's rickshaw-wallah. For a moment Ehrendorf stared into the slightly popping blue eyes of his successful rival. Then a lock of blonde hair dropped like a curtain from Nigel's forehead and only one blue eye was visible. Nigel reached a hand to his brow and removed the offending lock, allowing the silky hair to sift through his fingers to the knuckle while he contemplated the half-naked Ehrendorf with distaste. Ehrendorf dropped the shafts of the rickshaw and reached for his shirt, murmuring: 'I'll leave the rest to you, if you don't mind.' He hesitated a moment, examining Nigel without hostility. 'What on earth can she see in a chap like this?' he asked himself in wonder … but then, women had appalling taste in men, he had always thought so. Without a further glance at Joan he slipped away, forcing his way back against the stream of people.

'I say aren't you going to stay and help with the luggage?' came a faint, indignant voice following him through the darkness.

When at last Matthew and Vera had passed through the gates and saw the state of the quay, they looked at each other in dismay. Between where they stood and the narrow corridor through which the passengers were channelled there swayed a densely packed mass of people. Beyond, sat or stood half a dozen harassed officials examining tickets, remonstrating, copying names into a ledger, shouting, shrugging shoulders, looking impatient. Every now and then someone tore himself away from this dense mass and pursued his lonely way through the corridor then up the canvas-sided gang-plank to disappear at last into the looming vessel watched all the way by the boiling throng below. As Matthew and Vera thrust their way into the crowd they saw a woman make her way up to the ship's side sobbing with nervous exhaustion and dragging by the hand a little girl with a pretty, open face and with a ribbon in her hair, herself carrying a doll in a long infant's dress; behind walked a boy with a Meccano-set looking self-conscious and wearing a sun-helmet. After them there was nobody for a while, then Nigel and Joan, heavily laden with suitcases, made their way aboard and disappeared from view. Once, a powerful searchlight from the ship's superstructure was switched on, swept over the packed crowds on the quay for a moment, then died.

As the hour drew nearer one a.m. and signs of activity began to appear at the ship's side the crowd pressed forward more anxiously than ever. People shouted and waved tickets above their heads, hoping to attract the attention of the officials and let them know that ticket-holding passengers still remained on shore. The rate at which they were passing up the gang-plank hardly seemed to quicken, however, even though the officials must have realized that there was a danger of people being left on the quayside. Meanwhile, still later arrivals continued to flood in from behind, straining and pushing forward with all their might.

Abruptly, after an age of being jostled back and forth in the densest part of the crowd, as if by a miracle Vera and Matthew found themselves within reach of the nearest desk and, lunging forward, Matthew managed to slap down Vera's ticket. The official picked it up, looked at it and handed it back with a shake of his head. 'Alphabetical order, sir. Sorry. We aren't ready for this lot yet.'

'But the ship is leaving in five minutes!'

'I can't help that. Next please.'

Matthew had released his hold on Vera in order to deal with the man at the desk. Looking round, he saw that she had been caught in a cross-current of shoving passengers and thrown back. But this man behind the desk! Matthew reached out to take the official by the throat, but the people behind who had been shouting abuse at him for wasting time now seized his clothes and dragged him out of the way. As he struggled to reach Vera, something darted between his legs and away towards the gang-plank. It was an elderly King Charles spaniel. One of the officials tried to grab it as it passed but it swerved and eluded him; head down it battled its way up the gang-plank, darted past a surprised seaman and, plunging on to the crowded deck, vanished from sight just as the order was being given to raise the gang-plank (thereafter, some instinct directed The Human Condition unerringly towards the bridge where the captain, though worried by Japanese bombers and the anxious hours that lay ahead, at that moment happened to be contemplating with regret and longing his own little dog which, by a fortunate coincidence, had died, smothered in comfort, only a few days earlier).

Again a searchlight was switched on and swept hastily over the crowded quays, hesitating for a moment on a great net cradle containing a large motor-car that was being winched aboard. Matthew stared in disbelief: surely it was the Bentley which Monty had been driving! But how had it managed to get to the quayside? There was no sign of Monty. Perhaps he was lying on the floor. There were Da Sousa Sisters perched everywhere, however. A French sailor, looking handsome, clung on to a rope with one foot on the Bentley's running-board and with the scarlet claws of one of the Da Sousa Sisters round his neck. Suddenly, like song-birds struck by a beam of sunlight, the Da Sousa Sisters put their marcelled heads together and trilled:

Matelot, hulloa, hulloa!
In silk and satin and boa
We are the girlies from Goa!

The searchlight was switched out. Blackness and a sudden silence descended. The next moment a roar of outrage erupted from the disappointed passengers on the quayside. The gangplank was beginning to go up.

Again the crowd pressed forward, pinning Matthew's arms to his sides and squeezing the air out of his lungs. He at last managed to free an arm and reach out towards Vera…but as he did so, he saw the back of her reddish-black head vanish beneath the thrusting mob. In a rage he shoved his way through the crowd to where he had seen her go down, shouting at people to stand back from her. But nobody seemed to hear. As he groped for her on the ground his hand closed over a piece of wood and he picked it up, flailing about with it until he had driven everyone back from where she lay on the paved quay. He picked her up then and barged his way back towards the gates, still hitting about him with the piece of wood. Blood from her face began to trickle down his back. To the north the thud of guns continued. The Japanese assault on the island was only a few minutes away.

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On his way home from the docks the Major, having given up the attempt to find Matthew and Vera in the crowd, had called in to see a friend at the Rescue Control Room in the Municipal Offices; together they had gone up to watch the bombardment from the flat roof of the building where a number of other people had already gathered. The flashes of the British guns, the noise, the restless glimmer of the Japanese batteries to the north, all combined to bring back memories of his younger days which he would have preferred to forget. After a few minutes he said goodbye to his friend and returned to the Mayfair. In the early hours of the morning Matthew and Vera returned, shocked and exhausted by their ordeal. Vera, though cut and bruised, was not badly hurt. The Major was sorry but he was not particularly surprised when he heard of the crowds left on the quayside.

Despite the lateness of the hour a sympathetic audience had assembled to hear what had happened at the docks. Everyone had found it hard to sleep, perhaps because there was a feeling in the air that a crisis was at hand. The terrific Japanese barrage from Johore suggested that it would not be long before they attempted to land on the Island. Earlier, in response to a rumour that all the alcohol in Singapore was soon to be destroyed lest Japanese troops, in the event of a successful landing, should go on the rampage among the civilian population, a party led by Dupigny and Mr Wu had slipped over to the Blacketts' house and returned with several cases of wine from Walter's cellar. Since there were not enough glasses to go round a separate bottle had been uncorked for everyone. Soon a party was getting under way.

Gradually, thanks to Walter's fine claret, a mood of elation came to replace the sombre atmosphere which had prevailed. Festive sounds also issued from the board-room where the girls from the Poh Leung Kuk, under orders from the Major to accelerate the process of selecting bridegrooms, appeared to be having an all-night sitting. They had asked the Major if they could borrow his gramophone. He had responded dubiously to their request, wanting to know why they should need a gramophone for such a purpose? They had looked so disappointed and abashed, they had blinked their long eyelashes so submissively (and, after all, they had behaved themselves jolly well when you consider the uncomfortable conditions they had had to put up with) that the Major had found himself yielding in spite of himself. So, not without misgivings, he had handed over the gramophone, the only two records which remained unbroken and a box of needles with strict instructions that they were to change the needle *every* time before playing a record and not to wind the instrument too hard or they would break the spring. 'And I want to see every single one of you with a husband by tomorrow at the latest,' he had added sternly. 'This choosing business has gone on long enough. If you don't make up your minds I shall ask Captain Brown to do it for you.'

As a matter of fact, the Major had expected to find the bungalow quiet by the time he returned from the docks, but evidently the girls, in order to hammer out their final decisions, had found it necessary to retain their prospective bridegrooms even after the curfew. Now from behind the closed door of the board-room came the sound of laughter in the silence which followed Noel Coward singing 'London Pride'. The Major tried to estimate whether there was enough time for them to have changed the needle before the other record began.

The moon that lingered over London Town,
Poor puzzled moon, He wore a frown …

The Major, too, wore a frown. He took a swig from the bottle of Château Ducru Beaucaillou he was holding, hoping that nothing untoward was happening in the board-room. He really should have insisted on the bridegrooms leaving before the curfew: he could hardly expect them to leave now. Perhaps he would turn them out at five o'clock.

How could he know we two were so in love,
The whole darn world was upside down?
And as we kissed and said goodnight
A nightingale sang in Berkley Square …

Soon, the Major did not doubt, it would again be the turn of Noel Coward.

Presently, Cheong, who was also finding it difficult to sleep, joined the circle and he, too was given a bottle of claret. Cheong's status had undergone a remarkable change in the past few weeks. He was no longer to be considered a servant. On the contrary, he had now become a figure of considerable authority, organizing meals on a large scale and allotting space to transients who needed shelter both inside and underneath the bungalow. The Major depended on him heavily. On his own initiative he dealt with a variety of matters which, but for him, would most likely not have been dealt with at all. Had the Major not come across him burying someone quietly in the compound? To bury someone between breakfast and tiffin was nothing these days to Cheong. Sometimes the Major could not help wondering, such was the man's initiative, whether Cheong might not secretly be a graduate of the University of the Toilers of the East. Not that it mattered, of course.

Under the influence of the wine the conversation grew animated. Matthew, still full of bitterness after his experience at the docks and quite unable to put it out of his mind for more than a moment, began to discourse volubly in an anguished tone on the kind of society which must follow this one. It was the injustice which he saw all around him that maddened him! Why should privilege and self-interest rule in everything instead of justice and reason? There was no need for it. A society *based* on justice would get the best out of its members by appealing to their better instead of their worse natures! Dupigny shook his head sadly but did not bother to explain that this view of human psychology was hopelessly ingenuous; he could see that Matthew was upset. But, in due course, when Matthew had turned, as he often did when in a state of nervous excitement, to Geneva in order to make extravagent claims for those such as Emperor Haile Selassie and himself who had foreseen years ago that the devious, unprincipled behaviour of the Big Powers would end in wholesale carnage, Dupigny, pausing only to gargle blissfully with a mouthful of Haut-Brion, could not resist challenging him. 'I can't believe, even with the Italian invasion of Ethiopia to inspire him, that Haile Selassie could foresee in 1936 the troubles that we now are facing … unless at his court he had a fortune-teller with the crystal ball.'

'Aha!' cried Matthew. 'And yet, François, in 1936 he said: "Do the peoples of the world not yet realize that by fighting on until the bitter end I am not only performing my sacred duty to my people *but standing guard in the last citadel of collective security*. I must hold on until my tardy allies appear. And if they never come then I say prophetically and without bitterness, the West must perish.' "

But Cheong, and perhaps Mr Wu too, had had difficulty in following the Emperor's words and now he was looking enquiringly at the Major. Apologizing for the poor quality of his pidgin, which contained odds and ends picked up here and there on his pre-war Eastern travels, the Major interpreted as best he could. 'Empelor talkee this fashion … My fightee long time but world people no wantchee savee. My makee number one pidgin my people, same time makee all-piecee nation pidgin. Empelor talkee: Whobody come? My must stop look-see fliend no come by and by. Spose fliend no come, Blitain, Flance, Melika, all catchee too-metchee bobbery! All catchee die, chop-chop! … Er, I'm afraid that's about the best I can do,' and the Major sank back, puffing his pipe.

'It's always the same, François. Your Foreign Office and mine, instead of making a principled stand on the Covenant of the League of Nations, always preferred some private horse-trading behind the scenes.' Matthew tipped up his bottle and indignantly swallowed half a pint of Laffitte: almost immediately he suffered the odd delusion that he was a lighthouse and that his indignation was a small boat rowing steadily away from him. The thought of Lord Halifax, however, caused it to row back a little way.

With the Major desperately trying to keep up with him in pidgin he described what it had been like in Geneva when Haile Selassie had come with the Ethiopian delegation to protest about the Italian annexation and to demand that the Council of the League should not recognize it. On that occasion Halifax had risen to make what was surely the most grossly hypocritical speech in the history of international affairs: this, too, but involuntarily, Matthew knew by heart, simply because he had been unable to forget it.

'Halifax said: "Here two ideals are in conflict: on the one hand the ideal of devotion, unflinching but unpractical, to some high purpose; on the other, the ideal of some practical victories for peace … I cannot doubt that the strongest claim is that of peace … Each of us knows by painful experience how consistently it is necessary to recognize that which may be ideally right and what is practically possible …" And so on. If the League was not prepared to use force then it should submit to the "reality" of the Italian conquest in the interests of peace. Is that not outrageous, François?'

'Lord Halifax talkee this fashion,' explained the Major, struggling to find some way of abbreviating Matthew's harangue. ' "League of Nations idea blong plenty proper, plenty fine maybe, but League idea all-same plenty fine motor-car buggerup, motor-car no walkee. League of Nations no sendee soldier-man, no can do. Blitish Government idea yes can do."' ('Oh dear, I'm afraid that was a bit complicated,' apologized the Major.)

'Ah so,' nodded Cheong thoughtfully. 'League Nation idea no walkee … Howfashion Lord Ha Lee Fax no wantchee League idea? *Maskee,*[*] this blong all-same fool pidgin!' And with a shrug of disgust he, too, took a long pull at his bottle of Margaux (making a face, he preferred rice wine).

'The Emperor replied to Halifax: "The suggestion of Great Britain is to favour general appeasement by the sacrifice of a people. This is contrary to the ideals of the Covenant and those ideals so constantly proclaimed by Great Britain and France," and he ended, "It is sheer hypocrisy to attempt to strangle a people by

procedure!” ’

‘Empelor plenty angry,’ summarized the Major. ‘Empelor talkee: “You buggerupim League of Nations!”’

Cheong nodded gravely. He had assumed that such would have been the Emperor’s reaction, for what other complexion could be put on Lord Ha Lee Fax’s preference for ‘realism’, the gospel of the corrupt, entrepreneurial diplomats of the West, over principle? What could be expected, in any case, Cheong wondered, of such strong-smelling diplomats? He had more than once, in his previous employment in Shanghai, had occasion to take the coat of a second or third secretary from one Legation or another and he knew what he was talking about. When the new China arose, as he did not doubt that it would, a new type of diplomat, odourless and strong-principled, would strut the world’s stage. Then at last things would be different.

‘Will we never be able to loosen the grip of the self-interested and corrupt on human affairs?’ demanded Matthew, springing to his feet, his eyes flashing.

‘By the way, that reminds me,’ remarked Ehrendorf, who had just been splashing himself from the Shanghai jar in the bathroom and now came in drying his hair to join the company, ‘it seems that the expression, “the Singapore Grip”, refers to the ability acquired by certain ladies of Singapore to control their autonomous vaginal muscles, apparently with delightful results. The girls from the Poh Leung Kuk agreed to tell me what it was for a dollar. They hinted that for ten dollars it might be possible to arrange a demonstration. Er … of course I didn’t accept,’ he added, seeing that the Major was looking upset.

‘No, Jim, that’s not what the Singapore Grip is,’ cried Matthew, his eyes flashing more than ever. ‘I *know* what it is! It’s the grip of our Western culture and economy on the Far East… It’s the stranglehold of capital on the traditional cultures of Malaya, China, Burma, Java, Indo-China and even India herself! It’s the doing of things *our* way … I mean, it’s the pursuit of self-interest rather than of the *common* interest! But one day we shall have a new League of Nations to conduct the world’s affairs with reason and justice and humanity! A League of Nations not made up of cynical power-brokers but of philosophers and philanthropists whose only desire will be to bind the nations and the races together!’

Ehrendorf sighed, thinking that in any case the Singapore Grip was about to be pried loose, if that was what it was. After some moments of hesitation and comparing of vintages, he selected the Laffitte. Altogether it had been a hard day.

*Never mind.

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If you follow the Singapore River, from its mouth where it bulges and curves beneath the Fullerton Building, back along its many twists and turns, between sampans and barges so tightly packed that in places there is scarcely a channel wide enough for the flow of water-traffic, back almost as far as The Great World, then you will see an unusually handsome godown on the right bank, taller than any of the other godowns that line the river at that point, taller than any building of any kind for some distance and made taller by the familiar sign on its roof: Blackett and Webb Limited, painted white for the jubilee … Or rather, you would have seen it in those days, for now it no longer exists. The place where it once stood is now dominated by several many-storey apartment buildings where the resettled inhabitants of former Chinese slums now live, and even The Great World itself is mostly shuttered and empty, trembling on the very brink of no longer existing: its fortune-tellers, quacks and *ronggeng* dancers, its Chinese actors and mounte-banks, its brewers of monkey-soup and sellers of fruit, its pimps and soldiers and whores, have all been dumped in the dustbin of history and the lid clapped firmly on top of them. Their place has been taken by prosperous-looking workers from the electronic factories out for an evening stroll with their children, by a party of polite Japanese tourists with cameras who have strayed here by mistake, and by the author of this book writing busily in a small red notebook and scratching his knuckles where some lonely, last-remaining mosquito (for even they have mostly departed or been done away with), ignoring his dignified appearance, has not hesitated to bite him as he scribbles.

This particular godown was the one to which Walter had taken Joan to propose that she should marry Matthew (how far off that seemed now!): it was the oldest, the biggest, Walter's favourite, the replica of that first warehouse in Rangoon which, in happier times, he had been so pleased to point out to visitors when he was showing them the paintings that hung in his drawing-room. To that first godown in Rangoon who knows what happened? No doubt it was knocked down, or fell down, or a fine offer was made for it, or perhaps it was even turned into a cinema. Walter did not know. But he was glad that this one still existed. For Walter had learned something important from his life in commerce: that business is not simply a matter of making profits.

A successful and respectable business, on the contrary, is deeply embedded in the life of its time and place. A respectable business supports the prevalent beliefs of the society of which it is a part. If society at large considers it immoral for a woman to smoke a cigarette in the street or for a man to wear a hat at his dining-table, then you will certainly not find Blackett and Webb countenancing such behaviour in their staff. Not only at Blackett and Webb but at every other business of standing in Singapore the clerical staff, despite the temperature, were expected to wear white suits and black ties. Even the better Asiatic houses followed this custom. Respectability is important in business because it generates more and better custom: it means you will pay your debts and deliver the goods, resisting the temptation to make a bolt for the hills. Better business in turn generates more respectability. But in order to be respectable you do have to know what society approves of. Provided you know *that*, then there is no problem: your business can play its full part in the community. It is only at a time like the present when it is hard to be sure what society at large believes, or if it believes anything at all, that a businessman grows baffled and uneasy and perhaps with a shrug of his shoulders gives it up and limits himself to a dogged pursuit of his profits.

Walter certainly had not reached that stage; witness the effort and expense he had consecrated to his jubilee celebrations. But already, it seemed to him, Blackett and Webb was beginning to stand out as an oasis of old-fashioned virtues in a desert of less scrupulous businesses. It was 'the spirit of the times' again, that is what it was! Wherever you looked you saw it at work. Now, Walter had heard, in England women were no longer wearing hats and were going into pubs. Some women, even in Singapore, had taken to wearing trousers, not something he would have permitted to his own women-folk. Well, continue along that road and one fine day you would find that a gentleman's word was no longer his bond, but more likely an attempt to talk you into something. Why was this godown important to Walter? Because for him it symbolized the old-fashioned virtues and beliefs which were melting away all around him, progressively, in concert with the decaying spirit of earlier times to which he had been accustomed.

And yet … a man must move with the times. Think of those rice-millers in London for whom the Suez Canal had proved a banana skin on the road to prosperity! This godown was also important to Walter for the great qualities of raw rubber that it contained. A business cannot embody the highest aims of society without trading profitably from its warehouses. What they contain must not be wasted or abandoned. It was out of the question to allow these warehouses not to make the profit which lay piled up within their shadowy walls.

Now on Monday, 8 February, came the news that the Japanese had succeeded in landing on the Island in the course of the night. Walter found himself faced with a disturbing prospect: the contents of this building on the river and of several other godowns nearby would most likely be destroyed in accordance with a contingency plan for the denial of useful materials to the Japanese. He had long expected something of the

sort if the Japanese pursued their advance. Reports had reached him in recent weeks that officials from the Public Works Department had been snooping about making enquiries as to the contents of his various godowns. Their first visits had been discreet: the authorities had been anxious not to sap morale by making too obvious preparations for a capitulation … Lately they had become more officious.

Today there came word that the Governor had authorized destruction of British-owned engineering plant, oil and rubber stocks, liquor supplies and various others goods and materials that the Japanese might consider valuable. Well, he had expected that it would come to this … But above all it was the selective nature of the Governor's denial plans that stung Walter: Blackett and Webb (Engineering) Limited would be razed while neighbouring Chinese enterprises would be left untouched! It was an outrage. He promptly telephoned the Governor … but could not get through. He tried to arrange an appointment with the Governor's staff: he had never had any trouble doing so before, yet now when it was necessary he found himself being headed off by pipsqueaks of secretaries. He would be left for minutes at a time holding a telephone receiver, obliged to listen to baffling electrical interference: strange hiccups, faintly tinkling xylophones, the ringing of distant telephones on other lines, and ghostly voices speaking gibberish which, however, sometimes held a queer sort of significance.

'Old men must die. They'd not be human otherwise,' someone remarked cheerfully in the middle of a blizzard of clickings and buzzings. 'We're all on a conveyor belt, each one of us. We all must fall off at the other end. Does that answer your question?' Walter strained his ears but only to hear what sounded like a whole office full of telephones ringing. He put the telephone down, shattered. He was not used to making his own telephone calls at the best of times: that was his secretary's job. He picked up the receiver again: this time he heard what he was convinced was a stream of Japanese followed by high-pitched laughter. But they had only been on the Island since the previous night: they would hardly be using the telephones already. He tried to summon one of his assistants who understood Japanese but by the time he arrived the voice had been replaced by silence and, eventually, by the ominous ticking of a clock.

'Would you mind getting off this line, please?' demanded a woman's voice rudely.

'I certainly would!' snapped Walter. 'Blackett here … of Blackett and Webb. I want to speak to the Governor and I've been kept waiting forty minutes already.' A click. No answer.

Walter was abruptly seized by a dismaying thought: he had surely recognized the woman's voice. Had it not been Lady Thomas herself? He was almost sure of it. But no, wait a moment. Lady Thomas was ill. He had heard someone saying so at the Club and he himself had even sent one of his staff to Government House with a basket of orchids and a note signed by … by his wife, a forgery to which he was well accustomed and to which she had never raised any objection. He had forgotten for the moment that his wife was now in Australia. Moreover, Lady Thomas would certainly know she was there and would be perplexed to receive a note from her in Singapore … But the man he had sent had returned still with the basket of orchids and the note (why had he not grabbed it back, oh fool!) saying that he had not been allowed past the gate, that the place was a shambles. How a shambles? Bomb-craters everywhere. Walter had flown into a rage, suspecting that the fellow had not bothered to go to Government House at all, that he considered such a messenger's job beneath his dignity. Bomb-craters indeed! Walter had ordered him back to Government House and told him not to show himself again until he had delivered the orchids. Neither the messenger, nor the orchids, nor the note had been heard of since. Lady Thomas must consider him completely mad … a note sent by his absent wife … he himself rude to her on the telephone …

'Things do not look particularly rosy,' agreed the telephone. And then: 'Thy sex to love!' Or was it: 'Three sets to love!'? Walter strained his ears but could not be sure.

Never mind. Never mind all that. It was of no great importance what she thought. Besides, it was clear to him that he was being deliberately baulked by the Government House staff, with or without the Governor's permission. All right, all right, he thought, making a feeble effort to look at both sides of the question, it was true that the Governor must have a lot on his mind with the Japanese on the Island … but not to be able to get hold of him for such an important matter, that was an outrage! 'And whose taxes go to paying the salaries of these stuffed shirts I should like to know!'

But never mind. Even if he succeeded in buttonholing the Governor, he doubted whether he would be very helpful. Sir Shenton would be too conventional to entertain seriously the proposal which Walter had in mind. For, to Walter, the matter was plain: the Japanese were going to get more rubber than they had a use for, whatever happened. They already had under their control the entire production of Indo-China and Malaya. The Japanese would very likely agree that it was senseless to destroy the rubber in Walter's godowns. Well then, why should it not be kept pending the end of the war or, even better, sold under a strict guarantee to some non-belligerent nation such as Mexico or Portugal? Here Walter would have trading contracts and experience which the Japanese could put to good use: an understanding beneficial to all could certainly be reached with one of the *zaibatsu*. Walter had, he considered, an advantage over the Governor. He had had dealings for years with the Japanese. They were not ogres to him, as they undoubtedly were to Sir Shenton. Hard competitors they certainly were, but for that Walter could only admire them. Yes, an advantage could be won for Blackett and Webb in concert with, say, Mitsubishi, which would do no harm to anybody, least of all to the British War Effort. But Walter knew he must be realistic. There was little prospect of the Governor accepting such a plan.

Again he picked up the telephone. 'Who's there?' he demanded. For a while there was only that distant cascade of cymbals. 'You see,' said the telephone suddenly, 'capitalism *used to mean* a competitive export of goods, but that's all a thing of the past, I'm afraid. We now export cash instead … sending it out here where it can make a bigger profit, thanks to low wages and the land available for estates. The result is that we've become a parasite on the land and labour of Malaya and our other colonies. Did you know, Walter, that bond-holdings brought in five times more revenue than actual foreign *trade* for Britain?'

'What?' demanded Walter. 'Are you talking to me?' But the voice had faded once more into the ghostly plucking of a harp. And anyway, it must have been someone else called Walter.

On the other hand, Walter realized suddenly, there was probably no need to worry about the rubber, at least for the moment. For there was so much of it, several thousand tons. Unless they had some mad idea of burning down the buildings as well, which was surely not the case, the PWD busybodies would need several weeks merely to shift the rubber from the godowns to a suitable site for burning. The same was probably true of other commodities which Blackett and Webb held in their godowns. It was evident that what was most at risk was the investment in engineering and motor-assembly plants. It was that which would need protection. It was that which the PWD men would go for first.

But oddly enough, as it turned out, they did not. They went for Walter's liquor godown at the docks. A telephone message chased him round the city, warning him. He could no longer bear to sit in the improvised offices in Tanglin surrounded by a staff which had by now shrunk, thanks to the demands of the passive defence services, to an efficient young Cantonese, a couple of elderly Englishmen who but for the war would long since have been put out to grass, and two or three Eurasian typists. So, despite the danger, Walter had himself driven about the city inspecting the various Blackett and Webb premises and offering a word of encouragement to whatever staff remained (for here, too, the number of his employees was shrinking daily, almost hourly). Mohammed, his *syce*, did not seem to mind: he, too, seemed anxious to pursue his normal life.

Although he seldom stayed for more than a few minutes at each place he visited, it now took so long to cross the ruined city that the better part of Walter's day was spent in the car, an ancient Alvis which Mohammed had found somewhere. Monty had evidently succeeded in getting both himself and the Bentley away on the *Félix Roussel*. Apart from faint surprise that the boy should have had sufficient initiative, Walter had no strong feelings about his son's desertion. On the whole he was better out of the way. Once or twice, though, staring out with sightless eyes at the boiling streets, the thought of Harvey Firestone's five efficient sons made him clench his fists and caused the bristles to stir on his spine. How promising life had once appeared, how disastrously it had turned out!

Even the city now was hardly recognizable any longer as the place where he had spent such a great part of his life. The roads were clogged with military vehicles, there were gun emplacements every few yards, each crossroads seemed to have its own traffic jam which sweating military policemen were trying to free. And everywhere he looked he saw bomb-craters and rubble, shattered trees, uprooted lamp-posts, tangled tramway cables, and smoke from the buildings burning on every side. With the smoke there came, barely noticeable at first, a disagreeable smell. Old Singapore hands like Walter were used to unpleasant smells: they came from everywhere … from the drains and from the river above all, but also from less likely places, from Tanglin rose-gardens for instance, where the 'boys' sometimes failed to bury properly the household excrement, or someone's spaniel dug it up again. In Singapore you could never be quite safe: even while you stood smiling fixedly under the great candelabra in the ballroom at Government House, once a gift from the Emperor Franz Josef to the third Duke of Buckingham, you might suddenly get a distinct whiff of something disagreeable. But this was different. This was altogether more sickening. It seemed to cling to your hair and clothes. When you took out your handkerchief to blow your nose it was there, too. Presently, it became stronger and not even the swirling smoke could disguise the fact that it came from the bodies stretched in rows on the pavements which no one had yet had time to bury.

Tired of the endless delays and traffic jams on the way to Tanglin, Walter had a camp bed and a desk installed in the disused store-keeper's office in the godown on the river where he had brought Joan one day not very long ago. Thank heaven that she and Nigel had got away, at any rate! This little office, which was really just a box of wood and glass without a roof other than that of the godown itself way above, had strong associations for Walter, reminding him of the old days. It was peaceful here, too, and very quiet. The dim light, the smell of the raw rubber which rose in tiers, bale upon bale, to the dim heights of the roof, he found infinitely soothing. There was a window, too, in the office from which he could contemplate the river, not so very different even now from the river he had gazed at as a young man from this spot. He needed this tranquillity to restore and refresh himself after his wanderings in the city.

And still the city's collapse had not yet reached a limit which one could consider, however dreadful it might be, a stable state. On the contrary, familiar streets continued at an accelerating pace to be eaten away by fire and to crumble beneath the bombs and shells. A huge mushroom of black smoke had risen to the north: he paused to look at it from a window of the Singapore Club where he went for lunch. It issued, he was told, from the oil storage tanks at the Naval Base, to which fire had been set to prevent the Japanese capturing the fuel they so badly needed. From the Fullerton Building you looked over Anderson Bridge and the river, then an open space with an obelisk and the solid pile, now distinctly battered, of the Victoria Memorial Hall and Theatre and, away to the right, what might have been the two friendly onion domes of the Arab Community

Arch. The smoke had risen on a fat, black stalk which, from where Walter was looking at it, grew just beside the clock tower though in fact its source was on the northern coast: its mushroom cap was growing steadily and spreading to the south-east. Soon it would cover most of the city and, indeed, of the Island itself, snowing as it came a light precipitation of oily black smuts which clung to everything, blackening skin and clothing alike.

When they set out to make another journey after lunch, this time to the docks, Mohammed had to switch on the windscreen wipers on account of the black film of soot that crept over the windscreen. But nowadays one needed to be able to see, not only forward, but upwards as well, because of the Zeros that continually tore in over the shattered palms or floated like hawks up and down the main roads, waiting for something to stir beneath them. Mohammed, therefore, opened the sliding roof of the Alvis so that while he drove he could keep an eye out. He also glanced into his rear-view mirror once or twice, half expecting Walter to protest. But Walter sat mute. It was not very long before one or two black spots of soot began to appear on Walter's white linen suit. He tried to brush them off, but that only made them worse. Soon his suit, his shirt and his face were covered in oily black smudges.

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The Japanese fighters were now flying so low in search of people or vehicles to machine-gun that troops, and sometimes even civilians who had picked up a weapon somewhere, would very often fire back from whatever cover they could find. Several times Walter and Mohammed were obliged to leave the Alvis in the road and dive for cover. On one occasion, before they had had time to take shelter, a two-engined Mitsubishi bomber blocked the sky and a burst of machine-gun bullets from its rear turret stitched along the brick wall above their heads, showering them with fragments. Meanwhile, from a sand-bagged gun emplacement beside them a steel-helmeted corporal blazed away with a bren-gun. It jammed. Cursing, he struck off the magazine with a blow of the back of his hand and clipped on a new one. Nearby stood a shattered army lorry in which sat a headless soldier still grasping the wheel.

Once Walter saw one of the fighter-planes hit by a fusillade from the streets and go out of control, crashing with a roar some way away into a steep wooded bank beside the Bukit Timah Road. Yet although he nodded to the jubilant Mohammed and smiled grimly at the cheering Tommies beside the road and muttered: 'Well done … Good show!' he was not really interested. He was too preoccupied with other matters to care greatly whether a Japanese plane crashed or did not crash. And when one of the two elderly Englishmen on his staff came running after him as he was leaving for the liquor godown where the PWD men were about to start demolition work and asked him whether he would like to take a gun with him 'just in case', he replied sharply: 'Don't be absurd, man! We aren't going to take the law into our own hands.'

'But I meant …' stammered the assistant, astonished.

In the matter of the destruction of liquor, Walter did even better than not taking the law into his own hands: he lent it his active support, ordering one of the remaining secretaries to telephone the *Tribune* and the *Straits Times* with instructions for them to send a photographer. His intention was to have himself photographed smashing the first bottle of whisky. In the event no photographer appeared. Nevertheless, he still insisted on smashing the first bottle.

'We aren't here to launch a bloody ship, sir, you know,' said the Volunteer Engineers sergeant who had been seconded to the PWD. 'We've got to get through all that lot and several more bonded warehouses as well. Not to mention the shops, clubs and hotels all over the place.' Walter nodded: he knew better than anyone how much liquor there must be on the Island. After all, Singapore was the distribution centre for the entire Far East. Blackett and Webb alone must have several tens of thousands of crates containing gin, whisky and wine; he could only guess that altogether there would be well over a million bottles of whisky belonging to various merchants and institutions in store or awaiting despatch from the Island, perhaps even more when one considered that the flow of spirits from Singapore into a number of Far Eastern ports had been dammed up for the past few weeks by the outbreak of war and the freezing of Japanese assets.

The demolition squad set to work on the cases with crowbars. Walter, thinking grimly of his jubilee year, obstinately grabbed a bottle out of the first case to be opened and smashed it violently at his feet.

'Not here, sir, the fumes will do us in,' said the sergeant, assuming he wanted to help.

Walter fell back then and watched silently as the bottles were carried outside and smashed against the wall. Presently, in a sort of daze from the heat and the noise of the ack-ack guns, that distant slamming of doors that followed you everywhere in the city, he too picked up some bottles and smashed them against the wall. And he went on doing so, despite the heat. Soon he was obliged to take off his jacket: the sweat fell in salty drops from his chin and his shirt clung to his back. The other men had stripped to the waist but this Walter could not do, because of the bristles on his spine.

The smashing of these bottles filled him with a strange exultation. He felt he could go on doing it for ever. Whereas the other men, conserving their strength, merely made the effort required to break the bottles, Walter dashed them violently against the wall. Once, as he turned too quickly, he thought he saw two other men exchanging a sly grin at his expense, but he did not care. He went on and on. He ground his teeth and

smashed and muttered and smashed until his head was ringing. A mound of glittering broken glass rose steadily against the wall and in no time he found himself sloshing back and forth through deep pools of whisky which had gathered on the concrete surface. Even here outside the alcohol fumes soon became oppressive. Once, as he was sloshing through a pool of Johnny Walker, he lost his balance and sat down, cutting his hand on one of the bottles he had been holding and which had broken. He got up immediately, revived by the sharp stinging of alcohol on the wound, and went on with the job, but more carefully now. He was getting tired.

A telephone had been ringing for some time in the storekeeper's office. A whispered conversation took place between Mohammed and the store-keeper who had been eyeing Walter uncertainly. Mohammed finally approached Walter to tell him that his office had rung, afraid that Walter might forget that he had an appointment with the directors of Langfield and Bowser. Mohammed would have liked to ask Walter if he was feeling all right, but did not quite dare. He stared blankly at Mohammed for a few moments. Then he said: 'Oh yes, so I have. What time is it?'

When he had washed his face under a tap, and bound a handkerchief round his cut hand, he picked up his jacket and went outside to the car where Mohammed was waiting, holding the door open. As he made to get in he caught sight of his own reflection in the window. His shirt and trousers were black with smuts from the burning oil on the other side of the Island. He hesitated a moment, wondering whether he should first have driven himself to the Club to shower and change. But he was already late. Besides, there was a war on.

Langfield and Bowser's headquarters were in the Bowser Building on the corner of Cecil and Cross Streets. Had Solomon Langfield's house in Nassim Road not been devastated in the January air-raids they would most likely have moved their offices there, away from the centre of town, as Walter had done with his offices. As it was, on account of the sudden flowing back to Singapore of so many troops who had to be found billets, they had been unable to find convenient premises out of the danger zone. 'All the safe places appear to have been hogged by the bloody Army,' the Secretary had explained to those anxious members of the board who had remained on the Island. They might have managed to find somewhere even so, thanks to old Solomon's cunning and contacts, had the Chairman not been abruptly called to his reward. That had thrown everything into confusion. The result was that here they still were, holding uneasy board meetings in the Bowser Building 'in the thick of the action' as the Secretary put it. He belched dejectedly; for some reason everything he ate these days seemed to cause flatulence.

Meetings were now held as infrequently as possible, but unfortunately they could not be discontinued altogether: there was so much of importance that had to be discussed. They had been astonished and dismayed to hear of Nigel Langfield's proposed marriage to Joan Blackett and had spent many perilous hours attempting to predict its implications for themselves and their firm. If Walter Blackett got his hands on Nigel's stock or, what amounted to the same thing, got his hands on Nigel, then the future looked black indeed for Langfield and Bowser Limited. Walter would surely waste no time in diverting Langfield's most profitable business into Blackett and Webb's coffers, no doubt doing so with a wealth of plausible-sounding arguments about 'rationalization'. But Langfield's worried directors, sitting around their board-room table in steel helmets and quivering with alarm at the menacing sounds that filtered in from outside, had no appetite for a dose of rationalism administered by Walter … at least, not if it meant what they thought it would mean.

They racked their brains, wondering what Solomon would have done in such a situation, though really they knew the answer all too well. Soloman would not have got himself into it in the first place. But one thing, above all, puzzled them. Why had Solomon given his blessing to the marriage? *He must have known* of the danger of Nigel's being annexed, shares and all, by the Blackett family. Yet he had given his consent. This was altogether baffling. For they had known Solomon well enough to realize that he would not have done so without having some clever plan worked out in advance in the manner of a chess master who sacrifices a piece willingly in the knowledge that, in the long run, it will be to his advantage. Again and again this had happened in the past, though never on such a momentous scale. Solomon had proposed some apparently rash manoeuvre which had then unexpectedly matured before their delighted eyes so that they could hardly prevent themselves clapping their hands with glee. But in this case what was it that Solomon had foreseen? What could it be?

They took off their steel helmets and scratched their heads and then put them back on again, all in vain. If only Solomon had still been there to answer this one question! Well, as it happened, Solomon *was* still there, various freight carriers and passenger ships alike having refused, even at full fare, to transport him home to his grateful shareholders at such a time. He even looked very little different from the way he had looked in life: his eyes had always had a hooded, half-closed appearance. But though he might still appear to be listening to questions, he no longer gave any answers. Had Solomon pulled a fast one after all? Or had Blackett pulled a fast one? Or, just conceivably, had both of them? It was too much for the worried board to make head or tail of. The best they could do in the circumstances was to hope that the young couple would be torpedoed on the way home. That, at least, would solve this particular problem.

After Nigel's departure from Singapore Walter had telephoned, saying that he wanted to discuss a combined approach to the demolition problem. The directors had eyed each other uneasily (what was he up to?) but they could hardly say no. And so now he was on his way, though already an hour late for some reason. As the minutes ticked by, one or two of the more sanguine members of the board began to have tempting visions of

Walter lying riddled with tracer bullets in a ditch. But then, just as their optimism was beginning to increase, he was announced. And when they saw him they could hardly believe their eyes.

Instead of the brutal self-controlled ogre that they knew Walter to be, it was someone more resembling a down-and-out who now reeled through the door and stood gazing at them, wild-eyed. They all knew Walter, of course, at least by sight and reputation, if not personally, and there was not a Langfield man in Singapore (unless it were old Solomon himself) but had not found the mere presence of Walter daunting. Even if you passed him quietly drinking a beer at the Long Bar in the Club you could feel the electricity that charged the air around him. But the Walter who had now appeared was, well, pathetic. How could they ever have felt daunted by this dishevelled individual with a bloodstained handkerchief bound round one fist as if he had come straight from a waterfront brawl, this fellow whose suit could have done with a visit to the laundry? … no, not even the laundry could have done anything with it; it was fit only for the rubbish dump. The board of Langfield and Bowser Limited gazed long and hard at Walter and they liked what they saw. The Secretary, W. J. Bowser-Barrington, smirking politely, rose and offered him a chair.

Walter was wasting no time. Even before he had taken his seat he had begun to talk rapidly and somewhat incoherently about the destruction of engineering plant … selective, mind you, they were not going to do a bloody thing to the Chinese. What did this mean? It meant that when the war was over the Chinese would have a head start in engineering throughout the Far East. Well, they knew the situation as well as he did, he did not have to spell it out for them! What they had to decide, without more ado, was how they were going to respond. One firm alone standing out against the demolition order was not going to cut any ice at all. Together there might be a better chance, not good but better, of making the Governor see reason. The question was, how were they going to get the Governor to rescind the order *in time*! '*In time!*' Walter repeated, stifling a groan, while the Langfield men gazed at him, hypnotized. They had not so much been listening to Walter's words as marvelling at his appearance and manner.

'In time!' he groaned again, striking the table with his damaged fist and causing the blood to well up between his bandaged fingers.

While Walter had been speaking, W. J. Bowser-Barrington had surreptitiously scribbled a little note and passed it along to his colleagues; *Blackett has been on quite a binge!!!* They nodded gravely to each other as this note was passed along. The truth of it was undeniable. Moreover, as Walter talked an overpowering smell of whisky permeated the airless atmosphere of the board-room. Yes, the fellow had without doubt been on a considerable bender. He looked as if he were going to pieces.

At length, Walter's speech became halting and eventually dried up altogether. None of the Langfield men had anything to say and for a considerable time they sat in silence in the gloomy little room, listening to the distant rattle and boom of the guns. W. J. Bowser-Barrington wore a pink carnation in his button-hole and he had turned his head so that his nose rested among its petals; the sweet fragrance was a relief after the smell of sweat and alcohol from Walter. Since a reply was clearly expected, however, he stated his opinion, in terms as vague as possible and subject to all subsequent changes of mind and circumstances that there was little that could be done to resist, either severally or in concert, these admittedly undesirable developments, but that no time should be lost in bringing pressure to bear in the appropriate quarters in London for adequate compensation for everything that was destroyed.

'And that is something,' he added cautiously, 'which would certainly benefit from a combined operation, perhaps with other Singapore firms who find themselves in the same predicament. And what's more …'

'Ah, I see,' said Walter, cutting him short before he had a chance to finish. But instead of arguing or protesting, as they had expected (such a noisy scene, my dears, you have no idea! they had already imagined themselves saying to certain old cronies at the Club), Walter simply continued to sit there, breathing heavily, his eyes straying vaguely round the room.

'By the way, where's Solomon?' he asked suddenly. And then, seeing that the Langfield men were taken aback by this question, he added: 'I mean, did you ship him home or is he in a godown somewhere?'

'Well, no, he's here actually,' said Bowser-Barrington, pointing at a long wooden box beneath the table, on which, as it happened, Walter had a moment earlier been resting his feet. 'We'll probably take him with us when we leave. It's pretty clear that things will collapse here in a matter of days. We have a motor-launch waiting at the Telok Ayer Basin to take us to Sumatra when the balloon goes up. You'd better think of coming with us, old boy,' he added, his eyes narrowing insultingly, while the rest of the board gazed at him in consternation.

'Thanks, I'll bear it in mind,' replied Walter shortly. He despised Bowser-Barrington who was not even a real Bowser but had married one of the Bowser women and then changed his name to give himself face. He sighed. Then he got to his feet heavily, paused to look round the table, and with a shrug of indifference blundered out of the room without any further comment.

When the door had closed behind him an excited babble broke out among the Langfield men. What had the Secretary been thinking of! To invite Blackett to come with them, what an idea! Bowser-Barrington sat calmly and with a complacent expression on his face until the excitement had died down a little. Then he held up his hand for silence and began to explain. He now had the answer to that crucial question which had eluded them hitherto; namely, what could have been in old Solomon's mind when he had agreed to the marriage between Nigel and Miss Blackett? For Solomon, with his customary perspicacity, had seen that the real situation was,

in fact, the exact reverse of what they had imagined it to be. It was not Nigel and Langfield and Bowser Limited that were in danger of being swallowed up by Walter Blackett, it was Blackett and Webb which had become temptingly vulnerable to Langfield's, thanks to the fact that *Walter was going to pieces.* The old Chairman must have seen the tell-tale signs of Walter's imminent downfall and, with a clarity of mind which took your breath away, had drawn the appropriate conclusions.

It was true! What else could it be? It was suddenly so obvious now that it had been pointed out to them that they wondered why they had not seen it before. What a noise of jubilation rose from around the board-room table! So loudly did they cheer their Secretary and Chairman-elect that even Walter heard it and paused grimly on the way to his car, reflecting that the first thing he must do once he had taken control of Langfield and Bowser was to purge the board of its dimwits. But just for a moment, accepting the congratulations of his colleagues, Bowser-Barrington had a frightening feeling, almost as if he had heard what might have been a faint grunt of exasperation and a tapping against wood from beneath the table. But no, he was, of course, imagining it. It was merely one of his directors drumming with his shoe on the lid of the box in his excitement.

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Singapore Island (which, if you recall, resembled the head and ears of an elephant on the map in General Percival's office) was now under siege. Late on Sunday night the first Japanese landing-craft had crossed the Strait to attack the north-western shore. This had come as an unpleasant surprise to General Percival because it meant that the Japanese were attacking the top of the elephant's right ear. In other words, they were attacking the *wrong one*! He had confidently expected them to attack the other ear, using Pulau Ubin to shield their approach. Even when the reconnaissance patrol sent across the Straits by General Gordon Bennett had reported large troop concentrations opposite that right-hand ear General Percival still had not ceased to hope that they might nevertheless attack the other one … where they would find the fresh, newly arrived British 18th Division waiting for them. After all, it might just be that this attack in the north-west was merely a diversionary move, intended to make him commit his reserve to *that* front while the main attack would still come in from the north-east to deal him a stunning blow on the left ear while he was looking in the other direction.

Percival, trying to snatch some sleep in his Sime Road office while waiting for news of the fighting, simply could not bring himself to believe that what Gordon Bennett's weakened 22nd Australian Brigade was now having to repel was the main attack. Communications had been severed by the heavy bombardment from the mainland before the attack: as a result there was a long delay before reports at last began to reach Sime Road. At first it seemed as if things might not be going too badly. There was word of tough resistance by the Australians and of Japanese landing craft being destroyed in large quantities. But that coastline was too long and too thinly defended. Gradually Percival's hopes began to melt away. By the early hours of the morning it had become evident that this was indeed the main Japanese attack and that, by daylight, the right-hand ear would be virtually lost to the Japanese.

At 8.30 a.m. Percival at last committed his only Command Reserve, the 12th Indian Brigade consisting of Argylls and Hyderabads who had survived the Slim River, to come under Gordon Bennett's orders for the defence of the crucial north-south line where the elephant's ear was attached to its head. This was the Jurong line, the shortest and the last line from which it was conceivable that the Japanese might be prevented from seizing the all-important central part of the Island and the high ground at Bukit Timah. Because from Bukit Timah, if they reached there, they would not only be occupying that part of the Island where the main food, fuel and ammunition stocks were held but also be looking down on Singapore Town itself. Then it would be all over: the city would lie in the palm of the Japanese hand.

Nevertheless, although this north-south line was in fact the last truly defensible position before Singapore Town itself, Percival was naturally obliged to draw up a contingency plan; after all, even if defeat is a foregone conclusion you still have to do *something* (otherwise you would look a fool). Accordingly, after a visit to Gordon Bennett's HQ near Bukit Timah village to discuss how best to defend the head from the lost ear (that is, the Jurong line from an attack from the west), General Percival and his staff set to work with their maps drawing up the positively final perimeter beyond which there could be no further retreat unless to fight through the city streets.

Of necessity this perimeter closely hugged the fringes of the city itself, beginning in the east at the Tanjong Rhu Swimming Club to include Kallang Aerodrome, heading north from there to embrace the vital pumping station at Woodleigh, across country to include the reservoirs and the Bukit Timah depots and then down to the coast again at the village of Pasir Panjang. It was, of course, essential that knowledge of this emergency, last-resort perimeter should not filter down the chain of command, thereby encouraging a retreat beyond the last position from which a serious defence could be offered, the Jurong line. Percival gave details of the final perimeter to Generals Heath and Simmons when they visited him at Sime Road on that Monday evening. It was sent to Gordon Bennett in the early hours of Tuesday morning with instructions that it was to be kept secret. Bennett, however, promptly passed on as an operations order to his brigadiers those aspects of it which

might concern them. Once again, and now for the last time in the campaign, if Percival had listened carefully he would have heard the discreet sawing of wood.

On this Tuesday, while Walter was smashing whisky bottles four or five miles away, General Percival at Sime Road was doggedly trying to get a clear picture of where the leaks had sprung in his line of defence. This was not easy. The heavy shelling of the north shore had to a great extent destroyed telephone wires; wireless reports, when they came in at all, were confusing. In the course of the morning a flying-boat dropped out of the cloud-covered sky and landed in the harbour, bringing General Wavell, the Supreme Commander, from Java. Percival, therefore, now found himself having to deal with the tricky job of reorganizing his defences with the gloomy glass eye of his Supreme Commander fixed on him. Together they drove to Gordon Bennett's new HQ on Ulu Pandan Road, just off Holland Road to the south of Bukit Timah village. Wavell's lined and rugged face grew increasingly sombre as Percival passed on what he knew of the night's events. The deep furrows which ran from his nose to the corner of his mouth grew deeper, his brow puckered, and his good right eye seemed to recede further into his skull. His lips were slightly parted as if he were on the point of making some bitter remark about the competence of Malaya Command and of Percival himself. He remained silent, however.

Nor did he brighten up at the sight of Gordon Bennett whose optimistic and aggressive spirit had cheered him earlier in the campaign on the mainland. Indeed, his gloom deepened as Bennett began to explain that he had little information about developments in his area. Bennett himself was much subdued. How had the Japanese broken through the Australian troops with such comparative ease? This had come as a great shock to him. He could still hardly believe it. Consequently there was little sign of his normal ebullience as the three generals began to survey the situation.

But hardly had they begun their discussion when anti-aircraft guns started up all around them like waking guard-dogs. Within a few moments the whistling of bombs could be heard. 'Take cover!' yelled someone outside and each of the generals dived under the nearest table. Instantly the room erupted in a blizzard of flying glass and plaster. The foundations of the house quaked as more bombs fell all around. As he crouched under the table Percival noticed something bright and gleaming roll towards him. For a moment he thought: 'My God! It's Wavell's glass eye!' but on closer inspection it turned out to be only a fugitive from a box of child's marbles left in a corner!

When the three men stood up and dusted themselves off it was discovered that none of them had been hurt. Moreover, although one corner of the building had been demolished by a bomb (which fortunately had failed to explode) and both Percival's and Wavell's cars had been wrecked, there had been no casualities at the HQ itself. This seemed a miracle. The generals shook the plaster and broken glass off the map they had been studying and resumed their conference. 'Really,' declared Wavell presently, 'these constant withdrawals won't do, you know. You must attack, you must attack.

Percival and Bennett nodded thoughtfully, but what was in their minds as they stood there, all three of them, in this suddenly shattered room, as if in a tiny vessel tossed here and there in a mounting sea of confusion?

More cars were found. Wavell, determined to find out what was happening in the Causeway area, had decided to go forward to see General Heath at 11th Division. Just as they were leaving the Australian headquarters Percival was dismayed to see a group of Indian troops in filthy uniforms shambling along the road, rifles held any old way and not even properly formed up into column of route. He could not help glancing at Wavell: that merciless glass eye betrayed no emotion but Percival guessed what must be in his mind. How dreadful! Undisciplined men shambling about under their GOC's nose, that is the sort of thing that can have a bad effect on a fellow's chances if the rumour of it gets back to the Powers That Be. Of course, compared with everything else that had gone wrong this was a minor matter. The trouble was that this column of Indians was not alone by any means. Behind them, like a wound filling up with pus, Singapore Town was harbouring an increasing number of stragglers and deserters; in particular, it was reported that deserters from the untrained Australian reinforcements at the General Base Depot were running wild.

Exhausted though he was, Percival maintained a stoical determination to do his best with whatever opportunities the military situation offered. He was determined to show no sign of defeatism in front of Wavell. It was, however, only when they reached General Heath's headquarters that the really heavy blows began to fall. From Heath they learned that the 27th Australian Brigade under Brigadier Maxwell had withdrawn during the night. Maxwell? Was he not that same militia officer, a doctor by profession, whom Bennett had promoted as his protégé to the command of the 27th Brigade despite his lack of experience and seniority? This withdrawal had left a crucial gap between the Causeway and the Kranji River: this meant in turn that the most important road on the Island (that which began at the Causeway and headed south for Singapore Town by way of Bukit Timah village) lay open for the Japanese to push southwards *behind* the Jurong line which Percival had been hoping to hold. This was simply disastrous. Why had Maxwell withdrawn from his crucial position? He asserted that Gordon Bennett had authorized the move. The result, in any case, was that Percival now found his entire defensive edifice crumbling. He promptly ordered Maxwell to counter-attack to recover Mandai village and reoccupy his former position. He also ordered three battalions of the 18th Division to come under Bennett's command on the Bukit Timah Road, concentrating them at the racecourse to act as badly needed reserve. But these, as Percival well knew, were desperate measures.

It was half past two in the afternoon before Wavell and Percival returned to Gordon Bennett's headquarters. Here Bennett denied having authorized Maxwell's withdrawal during the night. In any event, there was worse to come. Brigadier Taylor's 22nd Australian Brigade, already shattered in the fighting which had taken place during the night, had been obliged to fall back to the Jurong line. Now, while Percival and Wavell had been visiting other units, news had reached Bennett that in the meantime Taylor had received the secret contingency plans for the last-resort perimeter round the city itself, including details of the sector south of the Bukit Timah Road which had been allotted to his brigade. Taylor had interpreted these plans as an order to fall back to this position. Accordingly, the last defensible position before Singapore Town, failing a successful counter-attack, had been abandoned without having been seriously put to the test by the Japanese. Given the confusion which now reigned behind the British lines, however, the units out of touch with their headquarters, the traffic jams, the communications difficulties and the hazards of organizing resistance with heterogeneous forces in territory that was unfamiliar to them, there seemed little prospect that a counter-attack would succeed.

By the time they had returned to Command Headquarters it was four o'clock in the afternoon. Now Percival was met by a worried Brigadier Torrance: a report had come in that the Japanese were approaching Bukit Timah village. Apart from its alarming general implications this news also indicated that the large reserve petrol depot to the east of the village was in danger of being captured. Percival ordered its immediate destruction and by six o'clock it had been set on fire. Wavell, meanwhile, had himself driven to Government House to see Sir Shenton Thomas. He was tired himself after the long day of visits and conferences. What must it be like for Percival and the others who had had no respite for days or weeks? Passing through the gates of Government House his eyes happened on a great basket of orchids decked with bright ribbons lying on the grass a few yards inside the railings. They had evidently been hurled over by some well-wisher too shy to present them. Most likely a sign, he mused, that the British were still popular among the native population in spite of their military reverses. He sighed as the car came to a stop and the door was opened for him. He must make a point of persuading Lady Thomas, who was sick, to return with him to Java in the Catalina.

At nine that evening, before leaving Singapore, Wavell went to Flagstaff House to say goodbye to Percival. The day, which had begun with at least some cards still held by the defenders, had ended with the defence a shambles. Nevertheless, before leaving, he had Ian Graham, one of his ADCs, type out a final exhortation for Percival to pass on to his troops; this was inspired by a signal he had received earlier in the day from Churchill comparing the British resistance unfavourably to that of the Russians and the Americans elsewhere and instructing the British troops to fight to the bitter end. Then, having ordered the last remaining squadron of Hurricanes to be evacuated from the Island, he shook hands with Percival and set off through the dark streets to the waterfront in the second of two cars, accompanied by Count Mackay, a member of his Java staff, and by Air Vice-Marshal Pulford. On the way they heard occasional shots. Looters, sensing the imminent collapse of the city, were already beginning the sack of shops and stores in the less frequented areas.

The Catalina was moored in the middle of the harbour. The car stopped beside the sea wall in the darkness and Pulford got out to look for a motor-boat to take Wavell and his party out to it. He was gone such a long time that Wavell, in frustration, suddenly opened the door on his left-hand side, the side of that blank, glass eye which throughout the long day had been picking up reflections of the British collapse. He sprang out… but the car had parked so close to the sea wall that there was no ground left on this side of the car. He fell several feet in the darkness on to some rocks. He lay quietly where he had fallen for a little while, breathless with the shock and pain, thinking: 'Singapore is done for,' until presently he managed to shout and his ADCs, groping anxiously, located him and carried him to the motor-boat. He was laid in the bottom of the boat and presently they forged out on to the black waters, lit here and there by the fires burning on the shore all around. When they at last reached the flying-boat it was found impossible to lift Wavell into it without unshipping the machine-gun which had been mounted at the door. The Dutch crew of the flying-boat, unfamiliar with the mounting, set to work on it as best they could. At last they succeeded in removing it and Wavell was hoisted up from the swaying boat. But even when Wavell was safely aboard and had been given whisky and aspirins to dull the pain he was suffering and the sacks of government documents which Sir Shenton Thomas had entrusted to him to take to safety had been stowed beside him, the flying-boat still could not take off. The pilot reported that such was the number of small craft trying to escape from Singapore under cover of darkness he was unable to find a long enough stretch of clear water. It was not until it at last began to grow light that they eventually managed to take off for Batavia, leaving the chaos and destruction of Singapore as nothing but a tiny smudge on the horizon, insignificant compared with the vast, shining sea beneath them.

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Matthew had returned from fire-fighting to find a note from Vera saying that she had gone to Bukit Timah village to look for a friend who might be willing to hide her from the Japanese. Matthew clasped his brow in horror when he read this. Had she gone mad? Did she not realize that she was going to what must be the most dangerous part of the Island? Neither Matthew himself, nor anyone else he met, had any clear idea of where

the front line might be, but it seemed likely from the noise of the guns that the Japanese were already advancing towards Bukit Timah. He hoped that there would be road-blocks to prevent her going forward, as seemed likely. But after some minutes spent pacing about, uncertain what to do, he decided to go and look for her himself. Even though he knew that his chances of finding her in the darkness and confusion were slim, at least this would give him something to do. And so, in due course, he set out on Turner's motor-cycle.

Matthew had only ridden a motor-cycle once or twice before and felt by no means confident that he could control this one, particularly on a pitch dark night with a masked headlight and the prospect of bomb-craters in the roads. But after five minutes practice in the compound under Turner's tutelage, wandering a couple of times round the tennis court and through the flowerbeds in the darkness, he gripped the knob of the hand gear-lever on the petrol tank and prepared to release the clutch. The machine pounced into the road like a tiger.

In a flash he was careering up Stevens Road through the warm tropical darkness in the direction of the Bukit Timah Road. As he charged onwards his searching foot kept finding an outcrop of metal which ought to be the brake … yet when he trod on it he only seemed to go faster, and the more alarmed he became, the faster he went, not realizing that in his excitement he was involuntarily twisting the throttle with his right hand. Dark objects loomed and vanished on either side with horrifying speed. On he sped, foot still searching for the brake-pedal. At the junction with Dalvey Road he at last realized that his frenzied grip of the throttle was what was causing the machine to bolt with him. He relaxed it and managed to slow down a little, and not a moment too soon, for here there was a roadblock. A masked flashlight waved to him to stop. He drew near, his foot searching more desperately than ever for the brake as he wobbled towards it.

'I can't stop!' he shouted at the dim figures standing in the road ahead. In his excitement he again forgot not to twist the hand-grip; again he found himself hurled forward. The figures scattered to right and left.

'Silly bugger!' one of them shouted furiously after him as he shot by. But already he was at the corner of the Bukit Timah Road. Then, just as he was certain that he must hurtle to his doom in the stream of traffic ahead, his foot alighted on another outcrop of metal which this time proved to be the brake. By a miracle he avoided ramming a lorry that loomed across the end of Stevens Road.

It was hard to see what was going on. The road appeared to be full of shambling, cursing figures, some going one way, some going another. A military policeman was shouting hoarsely at drivers from the middle of the road beside the storm-canal. Beyond the canal an occasional flicker of light betrayed another vast military column on Dunearn Road struggling in the opposite direction. Someone flashed a torch in his face and shouted at him hoarsely: 'You're going the wrong bloody way, mate. That's the way to the war!' There were no further roadblocks and nobody tried to stop him, but all along the road men and vehicles continued to thrash in the obscurity like the limbs of some stricken, fettered giant.

Matthew soon became skilful at directing his motor-cycle into narrow gaps between the labouring vehicles but his progress was slow, nevertheless. Near the racecourse a huge fire was flaring a hundred feet into the sky: this was the reserve petrol dump which General Percival had ordered to be set on fire an hour before dark. Against its glare Matthew could see the long-shadowed silhouettes of men and guns, for the most part struggling in the direction of Singapore Town but constantly being arrested by traffic breaking into the stream or forcing a way through it. He, too, soon found it difficult to make any progress, wedged in now between two lorry-loads of silent, apprehensive Indians. Meanwhile, desperate-looking figures continued to pour in the opposite direction, their faces transfigured by the glare. One of these men staggered against him, breathing whisky fumes into his face. 'What's going on?' Matthew asked anxiously. 'Are we retreating?'

'You're damn right we are, sport!' And the man heaved himself away, laughing hysterically.

Even by the light of the burning petrol dump it was impossible to see clearly enough to recognize someone. 'How will I ever find Vera in all this?' Matthew wondered hopelessly. From time to time, among the soldiers fleeing from the direction of Bukit Timah village, there were little pockets of civilians with bundles on their backs or dragging hand-carts; at the side of the road he could see the shadows of men jogging with poles across their backs from which hung boxes, suitcases or other burdens, but they all slipped by, heads averted: only by their clothes could you make a guess as to whether they were Indian, Malay or Chinese. Yes, it was hopeless. He considered turning back, but by now he had passed the racecourse on the right and Bukit Timah itself could not be more than half a mile up the road, so he decided to press on a little further. He rode on in a daze, travelling more freely the further he went. He passed a road junction to the left. This road was quiet and tempting but he ignored it and presently, as the ground rose on either side, he knew that Bukit Timah and the junction with the Jurong Road must lie just ahead in the obscurity.

Suspended between two rows of houses above the wide road a bundle of electric cables spluttered a cascade of white sparks over a scene of such confusion that Matthew's heart sank. Lorries and turreted Quad cars were wedged together at all angles with a tide of men flowing by on each side of them; military police, bawling at drivers and at each other and at the same time trying to marshal a squad to drag away an abandoned or broken-down vehicle, seemed unable to make any impression on the jammed traffic. In the very middle of this chaos, four brigadiers in an open staff-car were trying to read a map by torchlight and occasionally peering about them into the seething darkness as if wondering where they were.

Matthew turned the motor-cycle and allowed himself to be swept back the way he had come for some distance in the middle of a cantering mob of Indian troops, some of whom had discarded their rifles and boots

and were running barefoot, jabbering to each other hysterically as they ran. Matthew, infected by their alarm, kept looking over his shoulder as if expecting to find the Japanese at his heels. Abruptly he found himself at the quiet road he had seen before; he accelerated out of the chattering Indians and turned into it. For some distance after he had left them he could still hear them calling and chattering as they passed on down the road towards Singapore Town.

The road he had turned into was Reformatory Road which led down to Pasir Panjang on the coast. He could not be sure that it would not lead him into the Japanese lines … for where *were* the Japanese lines? However, provided the road did not turn towards the thud and flash of the guns on his right, he was prepared to follow it, though cautiously. A few tepid spots of rain began to fall.

Some way ahead in the darkness he saw the flash of a torch. He stopped the motor-cycle immediately and held his breath, his heart pounding. The torchlight reappeared a moment later, shining on the front of a car. It did not seem to be coming any closer so he left the motor-cycle and adavanced stealthily on foot. As he approached he saw the shadow of a jeep with a man in uniform peering under the bonnet; after a moment he slammed down the bonnet, said something to another man in the back and then began to jog away down the road in direction of Pasir Panjang, evidently to summon assistance.

Matthew moved forward cautiously, listening to the diminishing sound of the driver's boots on the metalled surface of the road: he did not want to be shot by mistake. When he was within a few yards of the stationary jeep the torch was switched on again and its glow revealed a portly little man with a moustache wearing a general's uniform; he, too, was consulting a map. Surely there was something familiar about that round, discontented face with its bulging eyes! This plump little fellow sitting abandoned in the darkness with raindrops beginning to patter on his red-banded hat and on the map he was holding was surely General Gordon Bennett, the Australian Commander! Matthew had seen a photograph of him in a newspaper inspecting troops. And now here he was, stranded in a broken-down jeep at what might be a crucial moment in the battle for Singapore. Perhaps he, Matthew, thanks to his motorcycle, might be able to bring help to the General at a vital moment. He hesitated, wondering whether to spring forward and offer his services.

Gordon Bennett, sitting in the jeep, had not heard Matthew's approach. He had been too preoccupied with other, desperate matters. These last few hours had been among the worst he had ever experienced in his life. He had been shaken that morning when he had heard the news that the Japanese had broken through his Australian troops on the north-west coast, a failure that had earlier seemed to him inconceivable. Then there had been the bombing of his headquarters while Wavell and Percival had been visiting him. As if that had not been enough he had later been made to look a fool in front of Wavell by not knowing what Maxwell had been up to in his sector at the Causeway. No, things had not been going well in the past few hours. Perhaps the only crumb of comfort was that earlier in the campaign the Sultan of Johore had taken quite a liking to him and behaved most generously. He had even been given to understand by the Sultan that in the event of a total British collapse some help with an escape to Australia might not be altogether out of the question.

Yes, Gordon Bennett had recognized in the Sultan a really high-class person, and the Sultan, for his part, he felt sure, had not altogether failed to notice his own qualities of good breeding. Not long before, so he had heard, a guest of the Sultan, a titled English lady, had expressed a caprice to swim in the shark-infested Strait of Johore. For many a host this would have been too much, but not for the Sultan. What had he done? He had instructed several hundred of his palace guards to enter the water and link bands to form a shark-proof enclosure in which the lady could safely bathe. That, Bennett knew, was class. He could tell a classy act a mile off. He sighed and reluctantly returned his thoughts to the map. It was just at this moment, as if the breakdown itself were not bad enough, that some wild-eyed civilian sprang out of the darkness at him like a werewolf. As Matthew emerged from the surrounding darkness Bennett shrank back with a gasp of alarm, showing the whites of his eyes.

'Who the devil are you and what d'you want?' he demanded furiously.

'I have a motor-cycle,' said Matthew, taken aback by this hostile reception. 'I just wondered whether you might like a lift… But I expect you don't,' he added as the General's cheeks grew purple. With an embarrassed cough he sank back again into the darkness. Presently a motor-cycle engine roared not far away and grew fainter. The General was left alone to the rain and the night.

When Matthew reached the Mayfair he learned that Vera, unable to get through to Bukit Timah, had returned to the Mayfair but had almost immediately set off again, nobody knew where.

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Walter had long since ceased to believe that the surrender of Singapore to the Japanese could be averted. If it had not been possible to stop, or even delay, the Japanese up-country with the help of prepared defences and relatively fresh troops, it was improbable that they would be stopped now at the gates of the city. Curiously, he gave little thought either to escaping or to rejoining his family. After all, they were safe. His wife and Kate were in Australia. Monty was heaven knew where … India perhaps. Joan and Nigel should soon be in Bombay. Joan's capture of Nigel, certainly, was a cause for satisfaction and boded well for the future of Blackett and Webb. In that respect everything had turned out even better than if she had got Matthew Webb

in her grip: once the two companies had merged, any attempt by Matthew to use his stake in the company to influence its policy could be comfortably out-voted.

Yet what a lot had been lost for Blackett and Webb in the past few weeks! It would be a long time (he himself might even be an old man, a grumpy old figurehead to whom the young executives took it in turns to make polite remarks at garden-parties!) before Blackett and Webb was again the commercial force in the Far East that it had been over the past thirty or forty years. All Malaya's rubber, tin and palm-oil were already in Japanese hands; in Java and Sumatra they probably soon would be. All the agencies … the shipping, the insurance, the import-export and entrepôt, the engineering and banking, were either in suspended animation or had been withdrawn to Australia or Britain, their management and staff scattered to the winds. Something on that scale is not built up again overnight! In so far as these enterprises had a physical presence (godowns, goods and produce in stock, engineering plant, vehicles and so forth) it was being demolished with equal enthusiasm by Japanese bombers and British demolition teams. Perhaps it was this single-minded approach to the demolition of everything that had gone to make up the presence of Blackett and Webb in Singapore, amounting almost to collusion, it seemed to Walter, that he found so disorienting.

His family had left Singapore. He no longer had any responsibilities, except to the people who worked for him … but even his duty to them had grown nebulous under the bombs. In any case, he could no longer exert any real influence to help them. He passed these few days, therefore, roaming the city aimlessly and alone, almost as he had done in his youth when he had lived in a mess run by one of the big merchant houses, with a lot of other young lads. So Walter drifted about the city like a shadow or brooded alone in the store-keeper's office in the godown on the river which he had made his temporary home. Once or twice, rather than walk or use a car, he hailed a *sampan* from where they clustered several deep with the *tongkangs* at the Blackett quay and had himself conveyed downriver to the Club. But the Club itself was unrecognizable, crammed with refugees, sick and wounded, and he left again immediately without speaking to anyone. On the Wednesday afternoon he made a sudden appearance at a bonded liquor warehouse where the same demolition team which had destroyed Blackett and Webb's stocks had now begun work. Without a word he took off his jacket and set to work with them. They were grateful: they needed all the help they could get. Walter smashed bottles doggedly until it grew dark and then retired once more to brood alone in the godown on the river.

As he wandered along the narrow corridors between the bales of rubber he tried to explain to himself what had happened. If he succeeded in understanding what had gone wrong then perhaps he would once more be able to gain control of events instead of drifting helplessly, now this way, now that. It was surely not the Japanese alone who were to blame for the way things had gone. One of the first signs, undoubtedly, that Blackett and Webb's hitherto secure grip on its own destiny was beginning to loosen had come with the labour unrest on the estates five years ago … not just his, but other firms', too, of course. Could the Japanese be blamed for that? Well, perhaps they could. They had certainly been behind a number of strikes in Shanghai against British firms. The strike in 1939 at the China Printing and Finishing Company in Pootung which had gone on for six months and for which British marines had had to be landed to keep order had certainly been engineered by the Japanese. One had only to look at all the anti-British propaganda that had accompanied it, the wall-posters, the demonstrations, the pamphlets, the slogan-shouting … even the sympathy strike organized at the British-owned Yee Tsoong Tobacco Factory. And then there had been a rash of strikes against other British concerns: the China Soup Company, the Asiatic Petroleum Company, Ewo Brewery and Ewo Cotton Mills, Ewo Cold Storage (Jardine Matheson had been a favourite target) and Paton and Baldwin's wool mill. But there was a difficulty here that Walter had to acknowledge. Although it was most likely that some, if not all, of these strikes were Japanese-inspired, it was extremely difficult to argue that they would not have broken out spontaneously, even without Japanese encouragement.

In a sense it did not matter whether these strikes had been encouraged for political reasons by the Japanese, or by the Communists, or had sprung up independently among disgruntled workers who happened to identify all employers with the British. Because given that huge reservoir of cheap labour with attendant 'exposed corpses' *pour encourager les autres* a mixture of the two extremes of submission and resistance was about what you would expect, in Walter's view. Thus the disadvantage of labour unrest was bonded indissolubly to the advantage of cheap labour.

In Malaya, however, which had lost its pool of cheap labour when immigration was curtailed as a result of the Depression, there were no 'exposed corpses' on the streets in the morning and the extremes to which the labour force had been driven were less stark. In Malaya it was clearly unrealistic to blame the Japanese for the growth of labour unrest. Purely political agitation by Nationalists and, above all, Communists against the British had caused a number of strikes which, because they were not based on genuine labour grievances, would not otherwise have occurred. Walter sensed that it was here that Blackett and Webb in common with other British firms had begun to lose its grip on the country and on its own destiny. A worker with a genuine grievance you can do something about. You can give him more pay, or sack him, or improve his living conditions. But what can you do with a worker who wants you to leave the country or, just as bad, wants to run the business himself?

'I suppose they expect me to dye my face brown and wear a *sarong*!' grumbled Walter aloud, pausing to lean wearily against a bale of the 'ribbed smoked sheet' that had made his fortune. He groaned. He had no difficulty in recognizing what it was that he had been up against. It was 'the spirit of the times' which had

stolen up on him again.

Presently, feeling hungry, Walter went out into the streets again. He did not eat, however, but instead went to the Cricket Club for a shower. His clothes were filthy but so were everyone else's he met: nobody seemed to find anything remarkable about his appearance. He was shocked, however, to see what he looked like in a mirror and while he was taking a shower sent someone to fetch Mohammed from Tanglin with some clean clothes. He felt better then and ate a sandwich.

Mohammed, waiting for him outside in the car, wanted to drive him back to Tanglin but Walter told him to go to the godown on the river. He was very tired. To reach the storekeeper's office he had to climb the swaying ladder some forty feet up into the shadowy vault of the building to the ledge which formed a rudimentary loft some way out from the wall. Two-thirds the way up the ladder he dropped the electric torch he was holding. He saw its light revolve once in the air as it fell. Then it went out and he could see nothing at all. Fortunately, Mohammed, concerned for his safety, had been watching his unsteady ascent from the entrance to the godown. He shouted up to him not to move and hurried away to fetch another torch from the car.

While he waited on the gently creaking, bending ladder, too unsure of his balance to go either up or down in the almost total darkness, he nevertheless thought how easy it would be to let go, to allow himself to pitch out from the ladder and plunge into the silent, peaceful depths beneath. Mohammed was taking a long time. So much rubber! It was all around him. He could not see it but he knew it was there. He thought of oil palms again but no, that was merely a detail … A man must move with the times, otherwise he is done for. Clinging to the ladder in the darkness he began to muse on this business of moving with the times. In Shanghai he had managed to do so with skill, why had he not succeeded in Malaya? In Shanghai it should have been more difficult. Surely no commercial city could have undergone so many drastic changes in such a short time as had Shanghai in the past five years: the Japanese war on the mainland, their blockade of the coastal ports, the ending in consequence of the Open Door policy and the decline of the Chinese Customs, not to mention all the deliberate Japanese attempts to strangle British trade with restrictions and monopolies. Yet he had not only moved with the times and managed to survive in that beleaguered, monstrously over-populated city, he had positively thrived.

Ah, but he could be objective about Shanghai. It was difficult with Malaya. Malaya he regarded as his own country. He had lived here most of his life, had raised a family here. He had a preconceived idea of what the place should be like. He did not want it to change. He liked it the way it used to be. 'I'm beginning to sound like old Webb,' he thought. Well, he had accommodated himself as best he could to the new labour disturbances. Perhaps he had not done so badly, after all.

Mohammed returned and Walter pursued his way upwards among the tiers of rubber bales by the light of the torch-beam from below. When he had reached the top Mohammed followed him up, carrying a basket with some provisions he had brought. Walter thanked him, took out his wallet and gave him a few dollars, adding that he would not be needed for some time, that he should lay the car up wherever he found convenient, preferably immobilized and concealed, and that he would be well advised to return to his own *kampong* until the situation became normal.

'A man must move with the times, Mohammed,' he said with a faint smile. Then he conducted him back to the ladder and held the light for him while he descended.

'Goodbye, *Tuan*.'

'Goodbye, Mohammed.' And the *syce* departed, feeling more concerned than ever. It seemed to him that only a madman would want to stay in this place by the river where rats fidgeted in the darkness and mosquitoes settled on you in clouds. And then, of course, there were the bombs.

From the little window of the store-keeper's office Walter had an unobstructed view, thanks to the river, for a considerable distance to the east and south-east in the direction of Raffles Place. Over the low roofs on the far bank some of the taller buildings around Raffles Place stood out in silhouette against other buildings on fire behind them. The looming shape of the Fullerton Building was visible, too, thanks to some vessel burning furiously in the inner roads behind it. Searchlights swept the sky, criss-crossing with each other; occasionally he could see the flashes of guns. Of the docks nothing was visible but it was clear from the pink-tinged clouds above them that they were still burning in several places. Nearer at hand yet another great conflagration had started in the godowns which lined the river between Clark Quay and Robertson Quay and on the opposite bank, too, between Magazine Road and part of Havelock Road where it ran beside the river. Walter, sometimes muttering something to himself, more often in silence, stood leaning against the side of the window for most of the night watching the progress of these fires.

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It was to this fire beside the river that the Mayfair unit had been directed by the Central Fire Station. They sped towards it through a corridor of fire; on every street they passed through there seemed to be buildings ablaze. The major hunched wearily over the wheel, listening anxiously to the Lagonda's motor and sniffing the odour of petrol that was leaking somewhere. The Lagonda had broken down once or twice but somehow had

been restored to the road; it now bore a jagged tear along one side from a piece of shrapnel and the paint on the bonnet was blistered in several places by the heat of previous fires. It had done good service, certainly. All the same, perhaps it was not wise to go to a fire in a car that was leaking petrol.

In spite of the curfew the streets were full of people, many of them refugees from the threatened area. The Lagonda raced past figures struggling with bundles and belongings, crashed and slithered over rubble strewn in the street, passed a crowd of looters dragging goods out of a shop window like entrails out of a dead animal. Matthew, beside the Major, turned to see a shadowy battery of guns pointing skywards which flashed and gulped one by one as they went by. Evidently another air-raid was in progress.

It was a relief to arrive at the fire by the river and set to work. This, at least, was familiar: the search for a water supply, the laying out of the hose, the starting of the pump. While they were busy looking for a convenient place to drop the suction hose into the river a dog came dashing up, inspected them and hurried away again. 'Adamson must be here somewhere!' And they all smiled, for this was comforting and familiar. And sure enough, presently Adamson appeared; he was still limping and walking with a stick; his manner was as casual as ever but for once even he looked tired. He said: 'I'd knock down that fence if I were you and do it from there. If you get in any closer you'll have one of these walls come down on top of you.' Presently he limped away again, vanishing into a trembling haze of heat and light with the dog at his heels.

Kee, Turner and Cheong were left to get the pumps ready, the others set off for the fire unreeling hose as they went. Evidently it had been burning unchecked for some considerable time for at its centre it was no longer possible to distinguish the individual riverside godowns: these had now become the fuel of a gigantic furnace. As they approached, they converged with other men, heads lowered into a glittering blizzard of sparks, dragging their hoses towards the fire's heart. Matthew was among the helmeted figures struggling through this brilliant storm, his pulse pounding with excitement and trepidation as it always did when he went to a fire. Had he touched wood? Yes. Or was that yesterday? He had lost his hold on the passage of time; events telescoped into each other. Soon the water was crackling through the hose and they were directing their branch against the outer walls of a vast arena of heat and light. For beyond the burning buildings which they were trying to contain, the fire possessed an inner core of other buildings which seemed to stretch over several acres and which by now could hardly be looked at with the naked eye.

Time passed. It could have been a few minutes but, looking at his watch, Matthew saw that two hours had elapsed since their arrival. Occasionally, hurrying back for another length of hose, he glimpsed the glowing inner core as he crossed a street leading into it. Then he would be buffeted suddenly by a wave of heat until he reached the shelter of the next wall. Once, as he hurried across one of these rivers of light, arm raised to shield his face, he saw two lamp-posts, whose elongated shadows almost reached him along the cobbles, buckle and wilt as they began to melt. An instant later he had plunged gratefully into the next dark shadow, unable to believe what he had just seen.

How strange it was to stumble from one of these avenues flowing with light into the black darkness of a side street! Here in the shadows an exhausted fireman sat on the kerb and used his steel helmet to scoop up the water running to waste and pour it over his head; when you looked more carefully you saw that he was not alone: other firemen sprawled here and there, driven back into this dark haven to recuperate. Surprisingly a mood of good humour, almost of elation, prevailed among these exhausted men: they called cheerfully to Matthew in whatever language they happened to speak … in English, Tamil, Dutch, Cantonese … they laughed and teased each other, put their arms around each other's shoulders and when, presently, the roof of a nearby godown fell in with a roar and another wave of sparks eddied over them illuminating the darkness of their refuge, a great cheer went up and someone began to sing 'Roll out the barrel'. Laughing uncontrollably, he did not know why, Matthew set off with the new length of hose he had been sent for, following the fire's perimeter. He was astonished at how quickly the fire changed its character from one sector to another. In one place it would be a cheerful blaze, gay with sparks, in another a sullen inflammation beneath blankets of acrid smoke; here, where the fire was spitting great streams of burning liquid towards a row of dark tenements, the firemen were fighting it with a desperate tenacity; nearby, where a bonded warehouse was in flames, they staggered about playfully, falling over each other like a litter of puppies, drunk with the alcohol fumes which billowed around them.

The night wore on. Matthew and Mr Wu were together at the branch, directing its jets at some gentle blue flames that prettily trimmed the roofs of a row of shop-houses, when they heard a sinister hissing above them. Behind them the men who had been singing fell silent. The hissing grew rapidly in volume and changed into a low whistle. Matthew and Mr Wu at the same moment dropped the branch and sprinted for the darkness. The next instant Matthew found himself lying face down in a pool of water issuing from a burst main; the road was quaking beneath him and he was being pummelled by flying fragments of brick and clods of earth. After a few moments a hand tugged his arm: he opened his eyes to see the ever-smiling face of Mr Wu. Together they began to search for the branch they had been holding and which they presently found, thrashing about by itself in the darkness. As Matthew tried to grasp it, it flailed up and dealt him a blow in the chest that robbed him of his breath; but Mr Wu had managed to throw himself on top of it and hold it down while they got a firm grip on it once more. A van now arrived, miraculously, from the Central Fire Station with hot, sweet tea in a metal fire-bucket.

While Matthew was sitting at some distance from the fire drinking tea with his back against a wall,

Adamson and his dog approached. Two godowns containing rubber, engine-oil, copra, palm-oil and latex stored as a liquid were on fire only a few feet back from the river. Although there was no hope of saving the godowns themselves Adamson was afraid that burning liquid might flow from them into the river and set the crowded *sampans* and *tongkangs* on its surface alight. He wanted Matthew to relieve one of his men who was directing a jet from the roof of a tall building nearby. 'Can you manage the branch by yourself? I'll send someone to help as soon as I can.' Matthew nodded. The dog eyed him dubiously and then looked up at Adamson, as if afraid that Matthew might not be up to it.

It seemed to take an age of climbing ladders up through the dark warehouse before he finally emerged on the roof. He immediately saw the silhouette of the man he had come to relieve: he had lashed the branch to an iron railing, but loosely enough so that he could still turn the jet a few degrees, and was slumped against the parapet which ran round the roof; he found it hard to get up when he saw Matthew. 'I've been up here all night,' he said. 'I thought they'd forgotten me.'

'Tea is being served down below: if you hurry you might get some.'

'Enjoy the view,' called the departing fireman, leaving Matthew alone on the roof. He turned his attention to the fire. From this position he could look down over the godowns and he wondered whether Adamson realized how far gone they already were; it seemed unlikely that a single jet could make any difference. However, he played the jet over the roofs on the river side, trying to let it stream down the outside walls to cool them and keep them standing as long as possible.

Soon he began to savour the strange sensation of being marooned above the city in the hot darkness; he was pervaded by a feeling of isolation and melancholy. The occasional drone of a bomber in the black sky above him, the slamming of distant doors from the ack-ack guns, the dull thud, thud, thud of bombs falling, the rapid popping and sighing of the Bofors guns, even the deep bark of the artillery … all this seemed perfectly remote from his vantage point over the rooftops. Up here he was only conscious of the moaning and creaking of the branch against the railing and the faint steady hiss of the jet as it curved down towards the fire. He could see a considerable distance, too: he could see the rapid flashes advancing along Raffles Quay and the Telok Ayer Basin as a stick of bombs fell, and the hulk of what might have been a barge burning near Anderson Bridge at the mouth of the river and another vessel blazing brilliantly in the inner roads, and yet other fires scattered here and there in the densely crowded residential quarters to the south and east of New Bridge Road. 'If a bomb fell here,' he thought suddenly, 'nobody would ever find me,' and he peered anxiously down towards the street to see if anyone was being sent up to join him, but with the smoke he could see nothing.

After a while he grew, calm again, soothed by the regular creaking of the branch. He was so remote from what was happening down there, after all. It seemed impossible that anything happening on the ground could touch him. Below was the fire, and beyond the fire and all around lay the city of Singapore where two hostile armies were struggling to subdue each other in the darkness. Up here it made no difference. All that concerned him was the fire raging below him: he must concentrate on playing the jet where it would do most good. But soon he found himself wondering whether his efforts might not be superfluous. With a change in the tide, burning oil from a stricken vessel at the mouth of the river was already beginning to flow up towards the tightly packed *sampans* and barges in the heart of the city. As the sky grew pale on the eastern horizon Matthew watched in dismay the leisurely advance of this fiery serpent.

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'The Blackett and Webb godown is threatened. Walter's inside and refuses to leave. Someone on his staff got in touch with Hill Street and they passed it on to us. Perhaps you wouldn't mind having a shot at persuading him?'

Matthew and the Major were sitting on the kerb beside the Blackett and Webb van which had once carried eight outstretched arms in various colours reaching for prosperity. These arms had not proved very durable and most of them had broken off going over bumps or pot-holes, some at the shoulder, some at the elbow. Only two still remained intact as far as the grasping fingers: Matthew suspected that they were the white ones but could not be sure. The steady precipitation of oily smuts from the sky had rendered white, yellow, light brown and dark brown and even the van itself a uniform black colour. Everything else in sight appeared also to be black, or grey like the sky and the smoke.

'I'd go myself,' said the Major, 'but I must get all this lot back to the Mayfair for some rest and food.' He stared vaguely at the palms of his hands which were raw and bleeding from handling hose in which the broken glass which littered the streets had become embedded. Matthew's palms were similarly flayed. They were waiting their turn while one of the regular firemen went about with a pitcher of iodine, dripping it on to the other men's wounds to a chorus of jokes, curses and cries of anguish. Adamson sat with them, holding out his own raw palms for this painful ritual. The dog slept with its head on his shoe. When, presently, Adamson got up to go for breakfast at Hill Street, the dog had to be shaken awake.

Matthew set off past a dismal row of buildings which had burned during the night: now they loomed, dripping, gutted shells in the grey light. Turning a corner he came upon half a dozen hoses lying side by side,

still swollen into thick veins by the water coursing through them. A little further on the branches, perhaps abandoned during a raid, were rearing and flailing like a many-headed monster in the deserted street. He walked on, wondering where Vera was. He hoped that by now she had returned to the Mayfair. It might still be possible, somehow or other, to get her away from Singapore before the Japanese took over.

Matthew had visited the Blackett and Webb godown on the river once before, in the company of Walter himself, as it happened, in the first days after his arrival in Singapore. He had glimpsed it again when with Vera he had visited The Great World (now bleak and deserted except for an ARP post) for it lay close by. But he had found nothing particularly interesting about it, except that it had his own name painted on it in large white letters. Now, strangely undamaged amid the bomb-shattered buildings on either side, it looked somehow more impressive than he had remembered it.

Inside it seemed very dark at first, and quiet. What little light there was came from above, falling from a great height into the dim amphitheatre in which he stood. And there was a pleasant smell in the air, perhaps from the bales of rubber that mounted around him, if not from the old building itself.

'Walter?' he called uncertainly, his voice sounding very small in this great space. It seemed for a moment that there would be no answer but then there came the sound of footsteps from the half-floor above and a familiar voice asked impatiently: 'What is it?'

'It's me, Matthew Webb. I want to talk to you.'

'Who? Oh, it's you. Well, all right … I suppose you want to destroy all this rubber, do you?' Walter uttered a grim laugh. 'I don't know what your father would have thought of all this madness that's got hold of everyone.'

'It's not about that. D'you mind if I come up there?' Without waiting for an invitation Matthew began to climb a ladder which he dimly perceived nearby. He found Walter waiting at the top, looking restless and irritable. He paused to recover his breath, peering at him uncertainly. 'Could we go somewhere where there's a bit more light?'

'All right. Come this way.' Walter led the way down corridors of rubber. At a turning an old rat stood in their path and stared at them insolently for a moment before limping away down a side alley. Around the next corner grey daylight issued from a little cubicle of wood and glass. A row of huge fruit bats, neatly folded, hung from a rafter overhead and slept. Walter ushered him inside and offered him a chair. Before taking it Matthew went to the window, anxious to see what progress the fire had made towards them. But although it faced east, the direction from which the fire was being driven, his view was so obscured by smoke that he could see nothing. He knew that it must be very close.

'You can't stay here, Walter, you know. Have you made no arrangements to leave Singapore?'

'I suppose like everybody else you want to get me out so you can burn the place down,' said Walter grimly.

'Don't be absurd. It's going to burn down without our help, I'm afraid. In any case, we're trying to stop fires, not start them.' He paused, noticing for the first time Walter's dishevelled appearance. The clean clothes he had put on the evening before were already covered in dust and even his hair was thick with it; both his eyelids were red and swollen, perhaps from insect bites. His eyes kept wandering restlessly from one place to another, without meeting Matthew's gaze for more than a moment.

'I'm glad your father didn't live to see this,' he said presently with an air of resignation. After a silence he added with a sigh: 'There was some fool here yesterday, an army chap … D'you know what he said to me?'

'Well, no …'

'I'll tell you. He had the gall to tell me that we were leaving the troops to do the fighting while we only thought of feathering our nests! Can you beat it? He tried to claim that civilians have been trying to stop his demolition squad from doing its work … He actually said …'

'But Walter, it's true. That *has* been happening in some places … Look, we must go now. We'll talk about it another time.' Matthew got up and again looked anxiously out of the window: this time a bright banner of sparks was floating by. 'Have you no way of getting out of Singapore? It's obvious we aren't going to hold out much longer.'

'As a matter of fact, I have,' said Walter, chuckling grimly. 'Certain business acquaintances are anxious to share their boat with me. What time is it now? They talk of leaving this evening from Telok Ayer Basin. You'd better come too, I should think. They wouldn't refuse to take a Webb, even if it meant throwing someone else overboard!' And Walter gave a sudden shout of laughter which rang in the rafters high above them. The row of bats slept on undisturbed, however.

'After all,' he went on presently, following some train of thought of his own. 'War is only a passing phase in business life … No, it was Lever of Lever Brothers who said that, not me! Yes, it seems that in the Great War he wanted, naturally enough, to go on selling his … what did he call it? Sunlight Soap to the Germans … He made quite a fuss when they wouldn't let him. He argued that the more soap they let him make the more glycerine there would be for munitions … which is true enough when you come to think about it. If you want my opinion there's nothing like a spot of patriotism for blinding people to reality. Now they'd do far better to leave certain things in Singapore as they are … Though destroy the oil the Japs need by all means, I don't hold with people standing in the way of demolition squads if they're acting sensibly … But no, you can't argue with these people. You can't say, look here, let's discuss it sensibly! They swell up with patriotic indignation. They refuse to believe that in due course, probably in a matter of months, we'll have come to some

understanding with Japan and everything will continue as before. Except that in *this case* it won't continue as before … why? Because a lot of self-righteous bloody fools will have destroyed our investments, lock, stock and barrel … and we shall have to start again from scratch!'

'Walter,' exclaimed Matthew, standing up excitedly, 'it's not self-righteous fools who are destroying your investment, it's the bloody Japanese bombers! My God! Look at this …'

A momentary shift in the wind had peeled the smoke back from the river like a plaster from a wound. Near at hand a row of blazing godowns pointed towards their window like a fiery arrow whose barb had lodged in a shed burning directly beneath them. It was not this, however, but the river itself which had caused Matthew's dismay for it seemed to be nothing but flame from one bank to another. The blazing oil which had surged up on the tide from the mouth of the river had enveloped the small wooden craft which clustered thickly over almost its entire length and breadth except for the narrow channel in the middle. Fanned by the breeze from the sea the fire had eaten its way up the twisting longbow-shaped course of the river, past another fire at Ord Road, under the Pulo Saigon Bridge and almost as far as Robertson Quay.

Matthew turned away, shocked, hoping that Adamson had managed to evacuate the thousands of Chinese families who lived on the river. Walter had joined him at the window, staring at the shining snake twisting all the way back to Anderson Bridge. He muttered: 'Terrible! Terrible!' and then turned away. 'But look here,' he went on, after a moment, 'you forget the heavy responsibility that a businessman has to carry …'

'Oh, Walter, please, not now. We must go.' Matthew sniffed, certain he could see smoke eddying up between the bales of rubber. One of the sleeping bats stirred uneasily. But Walter had slumped heavily in his chair again.

'You may think a responsibility to one's shareholders is nothing of importance but I can assure you … Think of the poor widow, the clergyman, the spinster who has trusted her savings to your hands and whose very life may depend on the way you conduct your business. I can assure you, Matthew, that it makes you think twice when you have the well-being of other, perhaps vulnerable, people to protect. In the early days your father and I often used to work long into the night after everyone had gone … Yes, I sometimes used to fall asleep at this very desk here from sheer exhaustion … And what made me do it? I was quite simply afraid that Blackett and Webb, on whom so many poor people depended for their living, might have to pass their dividends! Yes, scoff if you want to, I don't care!'

'I don't want to scoff, Walter. Of course I don't! I just want us to leave here before it's too late. We may be trapped.'

Walter again ignored him. 'Well, I suppose the world was a different place in those days. The spirit of the times was quite different from the way it is now. Singapore was different, anyway, I can tell you that much! We had none of the comforts when I was a boy that people seem to expect these days. You would hardly believe it but we didn't even have water you could drink out of a tap … In those days when my dear mother was alive she always used to filter it through a muslin dripston … you don't see them any more but in those days … And did we have these fine roads and storm-drains and whatnot? Of course not. We had to put up with the monsoons as best we could. Sometimes the only way you could get about was in a rowing boat! Not like today when down comes the rain and it's all over in a few minutes.'

'Walter, I can hear a crackling sound from down below … Listen!'

Walter nodded sadly. 'It was fun for us children, of course. Oh yes, we used to think it was great fun to have a change from the rickshaw. Mind you, we had fun in the rickshaws, too. Each of us kids had his own rickshaw and a coolie to himself. Yes. We used to make 'em race with us and see who'd win and we'd have a grand time. Yes … Grand! Grand!'

Matthew wafted the smoke away so that he could see Walter better. Then he took off his glasses, polished them with a dirty handkerchief and put them back over his smarting eyes. Walter's massive head was bowed on his shoulders and he might almost have been asleep. He raised his head presently, however, and said: 'Mind you, they were strict with us, too. Not like your father, Matthew, and his new-fangled ideas. Boys and girls all twined up together in the bath like a mess of snakes! That's what they call education these days! And then they wonder why the kids go wrong. Well, I don't know. When we children had our tea in the afternoon we had a Chinese "boy" to supervise us. And we had to be properly dressed into the bargain. Ah, how the girls hated to wear their stockings in the heat! But they had to, not like today when they run about practically naked. Any talking or nonsense and the "boy" would give us a sharp rap over the knuckles, I can tell you!'

'Walter!' cried Matthew, but was interrupted by a fit of coughing. The bats had left their rafter now and were swooping about the godown squeaking unpleasantly. Matthew's skin crawled: he did not care for bats.

'Yes, my mother used to hold court with a circle of young men around her … young lads who would come out East and get themselves into debt, silly beggars, by signing chits. My mother used to take charge of them just as if they were her own children. She'd see that they ate proper meals and didn't spend all their money drinking. She used to say to them: "What would your mother in England say if she could see you now? Think how her feelings would be hurt!" Ah, they adored her. Many of 'em were secretly homesick, you know, but didn't like to admit it because they thought it wasn't manly. They'd have done anything for her.'

Matthew again wafted his arm feebly to clear the smoke between them which grew thicker by the minute. 'Yes, it must have been pleasant here in those days,' he agreed with a sigh.

There was silence except for a crackling of wood from downstairs. Presently, Walter cleared his throat, then

stood up abruptly. He pawed the smoky air in surprise.

'What's all this smoke?' he demanded irritably.

71

That afternoon Matthew, the Major, Mr Wu and Adamson went to the cinema. The Mayfair unit's last pump had broken down near the Gas Works and the water pressure throughout the city had fallen so low, thanks to burst mains, that it was no longer possible to use hydrants. On their way back from the Gas Works they passed two cinemas beside the Volunteers' Drill Hall on the sea side of Beach Road. Surprisingly, one of the cinemas, the Alhambra, a small and rather shabby-looking place at first sight, was still open and was showing a film called *Ziegfeld Girl.* This seemed such a cause for wonder that they stopped and consulted each other. Why not? Just for a minute or two. They had such a craving for normality, even if only a glimpse of it… even if only for a few minutes. So they went inside, and once inside in the darkness they kept falling asleep and waking up, paralysed by weariness and comfort. With one thing and another they found it difficult to leave, now that they were inside.

When the light dimmed a newsreel, cheerful in tone, showed housewives with their hair tied up in handkerchiefs collecting pots and pans on the Home Front; next, iron railings were being harvested from parks and gardens. Matthew found this ridiculous and touching and was surprised to find himself in tears. The newsreel was followed by *Ziegfeld Girl.* He fell asleep for a few minutes and when he awoke it took him some time to fathom that the film concerned the destinies of a number of chorus girls. One of the girls, played by Hedy Lamarr, was beautiful, grave and sad. Her husband, a violinist of temperament, took a dim view of her being a chorus girl.

'Well, what is it you want me to do? Give up the job? I know it's a rather foolish way to earn money, but Franz, we need it!'

'Do you really imagine that I would stand by while you showed yourself to other men?'

Matthew sighed, his head dropped on to his chest and it seemed to him that he slept for a while. But when he awoke the same conversation still seemed to be going on.

'So we never really had the thing I thought we had,' Hedy Lamarr was saying. 'Faith in each other. If you have that you don't mind about the other things. You don't even know you haven't got them.'

'All right, take the job! Be a showgirl!'

'But Franz!'

A plane roared low overhead and the heads of the audience, many of them wearing helmets, wilted in silhouette against the flickering screen. 'I suppose it would be as well to put one's tin hat on,' mused the Major, returning his attention to the screen. But he put the matter out of his mind. He was too susceptible to the cold, rather sad beauty of Hedy Lamarr. He had never been able to resist that sort of woman: she reminded him of someone he had known, oh, years ago … That melancholy smile. 'What's she like now?' he wondered. 'Getting on, of course. Water under the bridge,' he thought sadly. Yes, Hedy Lamarr was very much the Major's cup of tea.

Now it was the dressing-room before the first night.

'Nervous?'

'Oh, Jenny, I … I can't even put on my lipstick.'

'Relax, honey. They won't be lookin' at your mouth.' A breathless, manic Judy Garland burst in. The girls chattered excitedly. They were quelled by a man who said: 'Listen, kids—I've got something important to say to you … in a few minutes you're going on in your first number. D'you know what that means? It means you're a Ziegfeld Girl. It means you're going to have all the opportunities of a lifetime crowded into a couple of hours. And all the temptations …'

'Oh dear,' said Matthew, drowsing with his chin on his chest. 'Soon I shall go and look for Vera.'

'The "Dream" number. Places for the "Dream" number.'

'All right, girls. And good luck.'

The music swelled and, as it did so, a bomb falling not far away caused the building to shake and one or two small pieces of plaster fell from the ceiling. In the warm darkness the audience stirred uneasily and one or two silhouettes, crouching under the beam from the projector, made their way to the exit.

But this was the 'Dream' number. A plump, sleek tenor wearing a voluminous pair of Oxford bags began to sing:

You stepped out of a dream,
You are too wonderful to be what you seem.
Could there be eyes like yours?
Could there be lips like yours?
Could there be smiles like yours?
Honestly and truly,
You stepped out of a cloud

I want to take you away, away from the crowd …

Matthew fell asleep, woke, fell asleep, woke again. His limbs had grown stiff from sitting so long in the same position. He longed to stretch out and sleep … in clean sheets, in safety. The palms of his hands, raw and weeping from the glass splinters that clung to the hose, had begun to throb unbearably; on the screen one glittering scene followed another: he could no longer make sense of them. The screen filled with balloons from the midst of which Judy Garland emerged dressed in white. Then there were girls dancing on moving white beds, girls in white fur, girls with sheepdogs. Meanwhile, the plot was begining to thicken beyond Matthew's powers of comprehension with Lana Turner forsaking a truck-driver for an older man with an English accent, identified as a 'stage-door johnny', who offered her a meal in a French restaurant, jewels, minks. This man bore a very slight resemblance to the Major. Judy Garland danced frantically and sang:

They call her Minnie from Trinidad,
And all the natives would be so sad,
Ay! Ay! Ay! …
If Minnie ever left Trinidad!

She was wearing a turban, three rings of big white beads and a striped dress, through the open front of which there was an occasional glimpse of her childishly muscled legs. Matthew found something distressing about her manic innocence. He fell asleep and woke again.

Now there was the shadow of the fat tenor thrown on to the sail of a yacht. As he spun the wheel he sang:

Come, come where the moon shines with magic enchantment, High up in the blue sky above you.
Come where a scented breeze caresses you with a lovely melody. While my heart is whispering 'I love you.'

Then Hedy Lamarr, reflected in a mirror misted over with steam, was getting into her bath, but Matthew could no longer make sense of it all and the others were asleep: even the Major missed this important development. Again and again the girls drifted up and down brilliant staircases wearing elaborate constructions of stars on twigs, of stuffed parrots, of spangles, trailing miles of white chiffon … and outside, beneath the music of the soundtrack, the thudding of the guns continued without a pause. The girls now appeared to be clad only in flashing white beads. On and on they went filing up and down staircases. Their clothes grew ever more elaborate. One girl had an entire dead swan strapped to her chest with its neck round hers. Lana Turner, descending yet another staircase, but not so steadily now, for in the meantime she had taken to drink, at last pitched over senseless while supporting a whole flight of stuffed white doves.

'Gosh! How can a girl do that to her career?' asked one of the other girls.

'I must go and find Vera,' whispered Matthew to the Major. But the Major was still asleep. Matthew did not wake him but made his way stiffly out to the foyer. He stood there for a few moments gazing out in bewilderment as the last glittering staircase faded from his mind and was replaced by half a dozen motor-cars blazing fiercely in a car park a hundred yards away.

Although Matthew had no clear idea where he should look for Vera, it seemed to him quite likely that he would find her sooner or later. After all, the space in which they could avoid each other was shrinking rapidly; they were like two fish caught in a huge net: as the net was drawn in they were inevitably brought closer together. The difficulty was that a million or more other people had been caught in the same net and now here they all were together, like herrings in a flashing bundle dumped on the quayside … it was difficult to see one herring for all the others. Finding himself across the road from Raffles Hotel he went inside and telephoned the Mayfair. But Vera still had not returned and there had been no word of her.

In the past few hours a movement of refugees had developed from west to east across the city as the Japanese pressed in towards the outskirts of Tanglin and from Pasir Panjang towards the brickworks, Alexandra Barracks and the biscuit factory. As the fighting drew nearer, the Asiatic quarters emptied and people fled towards the Changi and Serangoon Roads with what few belongings they could carry, rushing together in a dying wave that would presently wash back again with diminished force the way it had come.

Matthew allowed himself to be carried along by the tide of refugees flowing from the direction of the *padang* and the cathedral. His watch had stopped and he had no idea what time it might be … It had grown dark while he had been in the cinema and it was no longer possible to make out clearly the features of the people he saw in the street … strained, blank, Oriental faces, men and women with swaying poles bouncing with the rhythm of their steps. Matthew felt sorry for them. What business was it of theirs, this war conceived hundreds of miles away and incubated in Geneva!

He plodded along mechanically, so tired that time passed in a dream. The palms of his hands continued to throb, but at a distance, as if they scarcely belonged to him any more. Presently he reached a place where the macadam road-surface, melted by the heat of the day, had been set on fire by an incendiary bomb and was burning bright orange. He hurried past it, aware that it must create a dangerous pool of light to attract the planes which still lurked in the black sky above. There was evidence of looting, too: he found himself trudging

through sand-dunes which lay across his path and turned out to be sugar from a nearby store. He saw men and boys crawling in and out of shattered shop windows and a shadowy figure with a rickshaw full of bottles offered to sell him a bottle of brandy for a dollar. Half a mile further on he stumbled into a twenty-five-pounder field-gun halted in a prodigious traffic jam at a fork in the road: there were other guns, too, a little further on, and a great deal of cursing could be heard. A young officer sat on the wheel of one of the twenty-five-pounders.

'You don't happen to know where we are, do you?' he asked Matthew. 'We spent the afternoon over there firing on a map reference given us by the Sherwood Foresters, but the Japs landed a mortar on our OP truck and our maps went up with it.'

'I think this must be the Serangoon Road,' said Matthew. 'If you take the left-hand fork you go to Woodleigh. I don't know where the other one goes.'

'We're trying to get to Kallang.'

'Kallang should be over there somewhere,' said Matthew vaguely, pointing into the blackness with his throbbing hand. 'Those gun-flashes must be the ack-ack from the aeodrome, I should think. But you'll have to go back into town to get there. I don't think there's any road across. Are the Japs somewhere about?'

'No idea, old chap. To tell the truth I doubt if I'd know one if I saw one. I've only been here a week. You'll probably find them up the road somewhere. Well, thanks a lot.'

Matthew walked on into the darkness. Now there came a trickle of refugees from the opposite direction. He could just make them out as they flitted by with their bundles, some dragging carts, others steering monstrously overloaded bicycles. A party of men with rifles passed by: his pulse raced at the thought that this might be a Japanese patrol. The houses dropped away now; for a while there was a lull in the traffic and he could hear the guns grumbling for miles around. He wondered now whether it would be unwise to stretch out and sleep by the roadside, but plodded on, nevertheless. He was very thirsty, too, and his mind dully contemplated the thought of cold water as he walked. At length, however, he could walk no further: his legs would no longer carry him. An abandoned cart lay nearby at the side of the road. He crawled into it and fell asleep immediately with his arms over his face to protect it from mosquitoes. The battle for Singapore eddied and flowed around him while he slept.

72

When Matthew awoke day was breaking: the country round about was already suffused in a dismal grey light that reminded him of winter in England … with the difference that here it was sweltering hot still. While he had been asleep a lorry had parked a few yards away in the sparse shade of a grove of old, healed-up rubber trees. A British officer and an Australian corporal sat beside it, swigging alternately from a khaki water bottle. Matthew's thirst had revived with horrible and astonishing power now that he was awake and he could hardly avert his eyes from the water bottle. The corporal noticed and said: 'You look as if you could do with a drink. Come and have some water for breakfast.'

Matthew took the water bottle and drank. He was so thirsty that he had to force himself to hand it back before he finished it. The officer's name was Major Williams. He said: 'You look a mess, old boy. What have you done to your hands?' Matthew told him. He nodded sympathetically and said: 'Come back with us and we'll get you a dressing.'

They climbed into the lorry's cabin and set off. Major Williams commanded a mixed battery of 3·7-inch heavy AA guns and 40-mm Bofors on the airfield at Kallang. He explained that the Japanese planes were at last flying low enough to be in range of the Bofors. Until the past week only the 3·7s had been able to get near them. He added: 'We lost half a dozen men, though, in a single raid yesterday. It's not as if there are even any bloody planes left on the aerodrome. I don't know why they bother.' They drove on some way in silence, Matthew beginning to feel thirsty again.

'None of this makes any sense to a chap like me,' Williams said after a while, gesturing at the rubble-strewn streets. 'I used to work in an insurance company before the war.'

They had barely reached the aerodrome when a siren began to wail. The corporal, who was behind the wheel, accelerated down one of the supply roads, slamming to a stop some fifty yards short of the nearest gun emplacement: all three sprinted for cover. 'We have ammo in the back,' the corporal said when he had recovered his breath. 'It wouldn't do to be caught in the open sitting on that lot.'

Now, all around the aerodrome the guns began to thunder. A squadron of Japanese bombers was approaching. This was not a high altitude carpet-bombing raid; the planes were coming in low and had split up before reaching the target to confuse the ack-ack guns. A scene of frenzied activity confronted Matthew in the sandbagged emplacement where he now found himself. He had no idea what was happening and hung back, anxious not to get in the way of the frantically working gun crew. He gazed in wonder at the great 3·7-inch gun looming above him; its two enormous, tyred wheels rearing off the ground gave it the appearance of a prancing prehistoric monster, Meanwhile the range was read off on the predictor, shells were brought up, their fuses were set and they were stacked into the loading trays. At a little distance on either side an appalling shrieking and popping had begun as the Bofors guns poured their small, impact-fused shells into the

sky at the rate of two a second. To this shrieking and popping was added the prodigious roar of the heavy guns and the crump of bombs that made the ground ripple beneath his feet.

Matthew had never seen a gun fired at such close quarters and was overcome by enthusiasm. 'There's one, get it down!' he shouted, pointing and even climbing on to the sandbagged parapet in his excitement. 'Here it comes!' But the gunners paid no attention to him. They worked on grimly, for the most part not even looking up at the sky. They seemed to be working in a daze, automatically. Their hands were blistered and in some cases as raw as Matthew's own. The sweat poured off them. Sometimes they staggered under the weight of the shells as they handed them up. 'Magnificent! What splendid men!' thought Matthew, shouting and waving them on like a boat-race crew.

But now another bomber was clumsily droning towards them over the field, very low at no more than a few hundred feet, perhaps, coming from the direction of the river. Matthew leaped up again on to the parapet of sandbags and pointed, speechless with excitement, for evidently the gunners had not seen it. They continued to fire, not at this plane which lingered tantalizingly almost on their muzzle, but at some other aircraft which drifted miles above them and was scarcely to be seen through the canopy of smoke and cloud. Matthew, who did not know that the huge 3·7-inch would have been useless against a hedge-hopping plane, it was too slow (what you needed was a fast-swinging, rapid-firing gun like the Bofors, a glorified machine-gun), jumped up and down, almost having a fit. 'Look at this one!' he cried in a frenzy and again he pointed at the bomber which was still crawling steadily and now rather menacingly towards them, barely skimming the row of wooden huts on the far side of the field.

'Fire!' howled Matthew, gesticulating. 'It'll get away. Oh, my God! Quick!' But the men continued to serve the gun not placidly, no, but steadily, grimly, and the gun continued to fire at the other plane, remote, maybe twenty thousand feet above them and no longer even visible but obscured once more by the canopy of smoke.

'Can they be deaf?' groaned Matthew, looking, it seemed, into the very eyes of the oncoming bomber-pilot, and concluded that perhaps they were deaf as anyone would be, standing beside those guns all day. 'This may be dangerous,' he thought, jumping down from the parapet. But his excitement was too much for him and he promptly sprang up again, to see the Bofors on each side of him firing over open sights at the plane which was now a mere hundred yards away. For a second the two streams of shells formed two sides of a triangle whose apex was the bomber itself. The glass cockpit suddenly vanished, as if vaporized. Matthew ducked involuntarily. A dark shadow covered him, like a lid on a pot. An appalling rush of air and a quaking of the ground, in complete silence, it seemed.

Matthew again jumped up, in time to see through the smoke the bomber departing peacefully over the flat, marshy ground in the direction of Geylang, but very low … and suddenly it seemed to trip on some obstruction, and then tumble head over heels with a tremendous explosion. Now it became several independent balls of fire that raced each other onwards over the flat ground burning brilliantly as they went and leaving the main hulk of the aircraft behind. Even the great noise this had caused had only reached Matthew faintly. The crew of the 3·7 had stopped firing, they were grinning, their mouths were working and they were waving their fists, Matthew swallowed and the sound suddenly came back. He, too, joined in the cheering. Around them all the guns had fallen silent for the moment. Williams appeared presently, having detailed one of his men to find Matthew a dressing. 'I'm glad we got another one before we give up,' he remarked.

'How d'you mean "before we give up"?' Matthew asked vaguely; he now felt shaken and disgusted with himself for having exulted over the death of the Japanese bomber-crew; even though they had presumably wanted to kill him and his companions it did not seem right to have allowed himself to get so excited.

'The rumour is we'll surrender some time today.' Williams shrugged. 'It can't be much longer, anyway. A few of us here are thinking of trying to make it to Sumatra by boat once the surrender is official. We've got hold of a motor-launch over by the Swimming Club on the other side of the field.' He gazed at Matthew sympathetically. 'There's room for you if you care to join us.'

'Could I bring a Chinese girl? She's on the Japanese blacklist.'

Williams nodded. 'It might be a squeeze. The plan is to leave as soon after nine o'clock as possible if we surrender today. If not, then tomorrow.'

'I may not be able to find her in time but I'll try. Don't wait for me if I'm not here.'

Presently Matthew set off on foot back towards the centre of the city but shortly after he had left the aerodrome gates he was given a lift by a taciturn young Scot driving a van. There was barely time for the vehicle to start moving, however, before there was the roar of an aero-engine overhead and bullets began to furrow the tarmacadam. A moment later the plane, a Zero, had overshot them, was climbing and turning. The driver accelerated and the van began to sway violently from side to side. Matthew craned out of the window, trying to follow the path of the plane as it circled round behind them.

'Damn! He's coming back.'

The van screeched to a stop beside the Kallang bridge, slewing round in the road so that it was sideways on to the direction they had been going. Matthew and the driver plunged out, one on each side of the road. Matthew took cover in the doorway of a deserted shop-house and sank to the ground with his back against the wall, feeling sick and exhausted. The Zero came back. Another rattle of machine-gun fire and it zoomed over again. Then all was quiet for a while. Nothing moved on the road or on the bridge. There was no sign of the

young Scot. Matthew continued to sit where he was, staring at the buildings across the road.

Beside the canal was the Firestone factory: a long, cream, concrete building with green windows which had a slight air of a cinema, perhaps because of the name 'Firestone' in red gothic lettering attached to its façade. Matthew remembered now that Monty had pointed this building out to him on the evening he had first arrived. There had been some strike or other there. Some distance further along, sandwiched between the Gas Company gas-holder and the Nanyang Lights Company, was a bizarre little temple. Its outer wall was painted in red and white stripes and supported a multitude of strange, sculpted figures painted silver: a plump silver guru held up three fingers and gazed complacently back across the street at Matthew; beside him silver cows relaxed; the head of an elephant supported each gatepost while, on the arch above, a Buddha-like figure sat on a lotus flower and was saluted by two baby elephants with their trunks; on each side of the elephants, most curious, winged angels played violins and blew trumpets. Beyond, on the roof itself, an elephant-headed god rode a cow and a cobra rode a peacock. In front of the temple, like an offering, a dead man lay in the gutter under a buzzing, seething black shroud.

'I must get us both on to that boat tonight, come what may,' he thought, longing to go home himself and forget the cruel sights he had seen. With an effort he forced himself to stand up and go in search of the young Scot and find out why he had not returned to the van.

73

The last position from which a defence of Singapore might have been successful had been lost but still the city had not surrendered.

On the previous day, Saturday, 14 February, General Percival had found himself at last having to wrestle with the problem he had been dreading for weeks: how long would it be possible to fight on. The water supply was on the verge of failing. On higher ground it had failed already. Drinking water especially was in short supply. Because of the damaged mains there were fires burning out of control on every hand. Twice he had visited Brigadier Simson at the Municipal Offices to inspect the figures for the city's water supply for the previous day: he had found that two-thirds of the water being pumped was running to waste and that the situation was getting rapidly worse.

This was clearly a matter which must be discussed with the Governor who had, in the meantime, moved out of the bomb-damaged Government House and had taken up residence in the Singapore Club. This meeting with the Governor had left a distressing impression on Percival's mind. Sir Shenton Thomas was alarmed by the prospect of a serious epidemic in the city. Why then did Percival still hesitate to surrender? Wavell, now back in Java, had made it plain that he was expected to fight on as long as possible, if necessary by fighting through the streets. Behind this reluctance of Wavell's to countenance surrender there was undoubtedly the voice of Churchill himself. On the other hand, surrender was clearly the only way in which the civilian population might be spared some great disaster, either from an epidemic or from the fighting.

It is distressing to have to act under the impulsive orders of someone who, in a situation which concerns you deeply, does not know what he is talking about. Percival, as a deeply loyal soldier, was sufficiently nimble to dodge the notion that Churchill, trying to tell him what was best at a distance of several thousand miles, was nothing but a blockhead who had, moreover, already committed his full share of blunders with respect to the Malayan campaign. But no sooner had Percival dodged this disloyal thought than he found himself having to elude the grasp of another, even more cruel conviction: namely, that the Governor now sitting opposite him *was not real*. Nor was it only the Governor who suffered this disability: his wife did, too, and his staff, and indeed, everyone here in the Singapore Club and, come to that, outside it. For it had suddenly dawned on Percival that he was the victim of a cruel and elaborate charade: that the moment he left the Governor's presence the fellow would cease to exist. Percival passed a hand over his brow and tried to collect himself. Could it really be that Churchill, Wavell, Gordon Bennett, even his own staff, had no real substance, that they were merely phantasms sent to test and torment him, incredibly lifelike but with no more reality than the flickering images one saw on a cinema screen? Wherever he looked, yes, these deceptive images would spring up, but the instant he looked away again they would vanish. What evidence was there that they continued to exist when he was not looking at them? Why, he doubted whether the Governor, relying on the dignity of his office to deter Percival from touching him, even bothered to cloak himself with a tactile as well as visual semblance. He could probably poke a finger through him! For a moment, staring at the Governor suspiciously over the little table between them, Percival had an urge to experiment, an urge to reach out and grasp him by the throat. With an effort of will, however, he mastered himself and muttered: 'While we still have water we must fight on. It is our duty.' But he continued to stare at the Governor until the latter grew uneasy.

'Whatever ails the fellow?' Sir Shenton wondered while Percival's eyes, which for some reason had become unusually piercing, bored into him like the bits of two drills. 'He's been under a frightful strain, of course. But then, we all have.'

The Governor was somewhat relieved when Percival at last stood up to leave. Before he did so, he took the opportunity of returning once more to the subject of the epidemic he feared, but less with the hope of persuading Percival to surrender than of making sure that there was no doubt about his own position should

the epidemic in fact occur. Percival nodded, licking his lips in an odd manner, and then asked unexpectedly: 'What will you do now … I mean, immediately after I have left this room?'

'What?' The Governor was taken aback by this question which seemed to him peculiar, even impertinent. What business was it of Percival's what he was going to do now? Or … wait. Wait a moment. Did Percival suspect that what he was about to do was to send a cable to the Colonial Office putting all responsibility for the decision not to surrender on to the Forces? He replied shortly that he must now visit his wife, who was sick. Percival nodded at this information, smiling in a rather offensive and knowing way, as if to say: 'I'll bet you are!' and then took his leave.

Still, the Governor could not help wondering about Percival's odd behaviour, even while drafting a cable to the Colonial Office to point out that there were now over a million people within a radius of three square miles. 'Many dead lying in the streets and burial impossible. We are faced with total deprivation of water which must result in pestilence. I have felt that it is my duty to bring this to notice of General Officer Commanding.' There! His flanks protected, the Governor felt a little better. Still, there was no denying it, they were all in a pickle.

That night Percival dreamed not about the war but about an epidemic. 'What has your epidemic got to do with me?' he demanded indignantly. The Governor replied: 'If you don't understand, it's not much use trying to explain.' Then the Governor faded and Percival slept in peace for a while, until presently a little group of military advisers assembled round his bedside led by Hamley, author of *The Operations of War Explained and Illustrated.* They were less confident than they had been on previous nights, but nevertheless, recommended a bold stroke: the million people who now crowded into Singapore Town should arm themselves as best they could with whatever lay to hand and all charge simultaneously at the same point of the Japanese lines. When they had finished with one point they might turn to another, and so on until the Japanese were defeated. 'An attack by a million people,' declared Hamley pompously, 'is not to be shrugged off lightly.'

Now Sunday dawned, ominous, unbearably hot. Percival took communion and prayed fervently: he found it hard to masticate the wafer he was given: his mouth was too dry. However, his frame of mind was somewhat better. Only once, noticing the chaplain gaze at him with interest and compassion, did he find himself wondering whether this cleric had any other existence beyond the walk-on part of lending verisimilitude to his own Sunday devotions. He shrugged the thought off hastily. There would be time enough to worry about the existence of other people. The campaign was almost at an end.

He had called a conference of all his commanders for nine-thirty a.m. Brigadier Simson now reported that a complete failure of the water supply was likely within twenty-four hours. In the light of this news there were only two possible courses of action. One was to counter-attack and recover the reservoirs and the food depots at Bukit Timah. The other was to surrender.

It was agreed unanimously that there was no real alternative. The meeting was over within twenty minutes and Percival immediately set to work on the delicate and humiliating task of negotiating Singapore's surrender. It was not until late in the afternoon that, after much difficulty, Percival found himself at the Ford factory, sitting opposite the Japanese Commander, General Yamashita. Although a cease-fire had already been ordered for four p.m. it was agreed that hostilities should officially cease at eight-thirty p.m. Yamashita conceded that his three fighting divisions should remain outside the city that night to prevent any disorder or excesses. At no point during this trying interview did General Yamashita seem anything but completely real to General Percival (only Torrance, his Chief of Staff, who sat on his right, occasionally dimmed like an electric light in a thunderstorm).

This Sunday, then, was the last day of the defence of Singapore, the last day of freedom for the British who remained on the Island … almost, you might say with hindsight, the last day of the British Empire in these parts. It took time for news of the impending surrender to percolate through the stricken city, particularly since the bombing, strafing and shelling continued unabated all morning and afternoon. Matthew still had not heard the news as he struggled in the mid-day heat near the Firestone factory to get the body of a young Scot into the back of the van … as a matter of fact, by now he had lost count of the days and could not have told you that today was Sunday. Nor had the Major heard the news as, after a rather odd tiffin of tinned sardines and tinned pears, he and Captain Brown held a cut-rate auction of the remaining girls from the Poh Leung Kuk in the presence of the handful of bridegrooms he had persuaded to assemble, thanks to the good offices of Mr Wu. The bridegrooms were apathetic and uneasy and bidding was not brisk. But the Major comforted himself with the thought that to get them husbands of any description in the circumstances was not bad going. How would those girls who had declined to accept one or other of the Major's bridegrooms fare during the inevitable Japanese occupation of Singapore? He suspected that some of them, to judge by the lipstick and nail-varnish that was beginning to reappear, might fare all too well.

Matthew was now delivering the young Scot's body to the General Hospital in Outram Road. It had taken an age to get the body into the van (a corpse is heavy and Matthew was weak) and it was two o'clock exactly as he reached the hospital. There, beside one of the paths leading up the slope to the main building, a mass grave had been dug. He looked up, afflicted by the sight of so many bodies laid out on the lawn for burial, and noticed the white clock tower above the portico of the main block with its four small, black clock faces. It came as a shock, somehow. The clock looked so peaceful nestling there beneath drooping classical garlands while on the ground below there was nothing to be seen but carnage and violent death. Two o'clock.

Two, three hours passed in a dream. The guns had fallen silent at last and bombs ceased to fall on the city. At the Mayfair there was no sign of Vera. Matthew longed to lie down there and sleep but time was slipping away and he must find her soon if they were to escape that night. A little later, without remembering how he had got there, he found himself sitting on his heels and gazing down at the wall of the storm-drain that ran along Orchard Road; part of it had fallen in, revealing a great wedge of neatly packed pink bricks, like the roe of a gutted fish, each with the word Jurong neatly printed on its back.

Later again he passed Dr Brownley scurrying along Battery Road in the direction of Whiteaways': he called to him but the Doctor paid no attention. His eyes were shining, his pulse was racing, he suffered a painful, joyful constriction of his respiration. In his ears, instead of Matthew's greeting, a celestial music sounded, while in his pocket rested $985·50 cents which in a moment he would be exchanging for the only true object of his desire, that article which had fixed him with its basilisk stare from Whiteaways' window, whatever it was. Dr Brownley was flying as if to greet a lover (but let him pass on, for which of us is so poor in spirit that he has never experienced the delights of being united in bonds of ownership with a piece of merchandise?).

Then Matthew, having wished the Doctor well under his breath, was standing in the cathedral grounds inspecting a collection of furniture that had been carried outside. The pews, he noticed, were made of solid wood, such as one might find in any English church, but with woven rush seats and backs as a concession to the tropics. Inside, a hospital had been improvised. The shuttered sides of the building stood open, as did another row of shutters just beneath the timbered roof. Rows of wounded had been laid on the brown stone flags beneath a couple of dozen silently revolving fans which hung from elbowed brackets along the aisle. Nearer to the altar, a number of men and women knelt in prayer, some of them in uniform. From a distance this scene, like that in the grounds of the General Hospital, appeared relatively peaceful. It seemed to Matthew that the human beings in it looked quite insignificant compared with the great building which rose above them. The fans, revolving like propellers some distance below the dim heights of the roof, gave him the restful impression that he was under water … It was only when he looked with more particular attention at the wounded on the floor that he realized that here, too, people lay shattered and dying. Shocked, he fell back, intending to continue his search somewhere else. But then, at last, he saw Vera working among the patients not far away.

Vera saw him at almost the same moment. She hurried towards him but, at the last instant, hung back. He had thought at first that she was wearing a red and white dress. Now he saw that it was an overall and that she was soaked in blood from head to foot.

'I know,' she said immediately. 'I'm going to change as soon as I can.' She smiled at him then and burst into tears.

They went outside for a moment. 'D'you notice something odd?' he asked suddenly. 'There are no birds. They've all gone. That's why it seems so quiet.'

'Tell me where you'll be later,' Vera said. 'I can't talk to you now. I must go.'

'I'll come back here just after seven. There may be a boat leaving tonight which we could both take.'

Vera borrowed his handkerchief, dried her eyes, smiled at him and hurried away. He retired a little way into the grounds but lingered for a while, watching her as she moved from one patient to another.

Later, after lying down for some time on the cathedral lawn, he joined the crowds milling slowly about in Raffles Place. A strange hush had fallen over everything: in it the occasional crash or crackle of a fire not far away in Battery Road or Market Street could be clearly heard. People drifted, for the most part aimlessly, in and out of the shops that were still open, or simply stood about talking in little groups. Many people had suitcases or bundles, evidently refugees from up-country or from districts lying outside the British-held perimeter. There were a number of forlorn-looking children: some of them had been bedded down on the street or in doorways by their parents. There were a great many soldiers: some of them, in defiance of the supposed destruction of liquor, were drunk and belligerent.

A dense crowd had gathered at the far end of Raffles Place in front of the Mercantile Bank. There, under a thick stone colonnade, someone was shouting. Matthew pressed forward into the crowd to see what was happening. A sculpted stone flame resembling an ice-cream cone twirled up over the grandiose entrance to the Mercantile Bank. Above that, two fluted, indigestible stone pillars supported four more twirled ice-cream cones set in dishes. It was beneath this important façade that a ragged British Tommy had chosen to address the crowd. Matthew strained to hear what he was saying.

'A dirty capitalist war!' he was shouting. 'We've no reason to be here at all. Listen, mates, which of us gives a damn for the bleedin' Chinese? Let 'em sort it out for themselves with the bloody Japs … What's it to do with us? I'll tell you what … It's greedy profiteers in London, that's what it is …'

A drunken shout of approval rose from the troops packed together in front of this vociferous figure. There were jeers, too, and bitter laughter. Matthew muttered: 'No, that's all wrong …' and tried to force his way through the mob. But now, abruptly, a fight flared up just beside him and in the sudden thrashing of fists and boots Matthew was shoved backwards and somebody's elbow caught him a blow in the face. He fell and for a moment, dazed, was afraid that the crowd would surge over him before he could get up. He could still hear the Tommy ranting as he scrambled to his feet and worked his way round to the right by the Meyer Building, muttering to himself as he went.

Now he had shoved his way in under the colonnade and was almost within reach of the table on which the

soldier was standing, still declaiming wildly against the profiteers and their native henchmen. At this moment a missile, perhaps a bottle, hurled from the crowd, struck the speaker and he fell suddenly to his knees, crouching on the table like a wild animal, blood pouring from his temple. Matthew saw the glinting studs of his boots as he knelt there with his head between his knees. Then someone helped him off the table and Matthew immediately jumped up in his place, holding up his hand and shouting:

'No! Don't you see? Things don't have to be like this … Please listen to me! It's just a question of how we approach each other. People seem to think that self-interest … No, what I mean to say really … Wait! We're no different from each other, after all! We don't have to have … yes, I believe it, and one day we won't! We won't have them …! We shall live …!' He tried to say more but a great wave of jeering and yelling surged forward from the crowd and his voice broke. 'Oh, don't you see, you're playing *their* game …' he muttered, gazing down in distress at the baying crowd in front of him until, a moment later, a bottle came winging end over end towards him and struck him a numbing blow in the ribs. He staggered back with a gasp. A hand gripped his arm firmly and dragged him off the table. He found himself looking at the grinning face of Dupigny.

'François,' he muttered. 'What are you doing …?'

'D'you want to get yourself killed?' asked Dupigny. 'Now is not the moment for such nonsense.'

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At the Adelphi Hotel beside the cathedral someone had had the foresight to fill several baths before the water supply had failed. Although these baths had already been used by several people and the water in them had taken on a dark grey colour, both Matthew and Dupigny took advantage of them and were feeling distinctly refreshed as they emerged from the hotel into the twilight and crossed the road to the cathedral grounds. Dupigny himself had decided not to try to escape. He was too old, he had explained with a shrug, and besides '*avec la Boche en France*' … He would stay and keep his friend the Major company during the internment which no doubt awaited them. He had agreed to drive Matthew and Vera to the boat waiting at Tanjong Rhu, however.

A great crowd had gathered around the cathedral in the dusk, and seeing it Matthew began to feel anxious again, lest they should not be able to locate Vera. A service was in progress and these people standing in devout silence several deep around the building were those who had been unable to find room inside. As Matthew and Dupigny searched the fringes of this crowd the congregation began to sing:

Praise, my soul, the King of
To his feet thy tribute bring.
Ransomed, healed, restored, forgiven
Who like me his praise should sing?
Praise him! Praise him!
Praise the everlasting King!

Suddenly a young woman detached herself from the crowd and took Matthew's arm. It was Vera. He gazed at her, smiling with relief, remembering how he had first seen her come up to him in the twilight at The Great World just like this.

'Come,' said Dupigny.

It was very dark by the time they reached the aerodrome. They left the car near the entrance, having decided that in order not to attract attention it would be best to complete their journey on foot. It seemed to grow even darker, however, once they were on the airfield itself and they had to grope their way forward with the utmost caution to avoid bomb-craters and other obstacles. This wandering in the blackness seemed to take an age. Once, not far away, they saw a party of men with a powerful torch, also moving across the field. They crouched down and held their breath while the men went by, talking among themselves. It was impossible to tell what language they were speaking. The wavering light of the torch moved on for another hundred yards, then was switched off suddenly. A little later it was switched on again and some distance further away and played for a moment on the shattered barrel of a spiked anti-aircraft gun. Then the torch vanished once more. Matthew, Vera and Dupigny continued their laborious journey. At last they could hear the lapping of the water and a voice spoke to them quietly from the darkness. Matthew answered. It was Major Williams.

'Glad you made it. There are some other people about so we'd better be quiet. They may be Japs or other escapers. You just got here in time, as a matter of fact, because we're about ready to leave. The boat's out here.'

Ahead of them a shaded light appeared for a second or two on a gang-plank. Matthew glimpsed the Australian corporal he had seen that morning with Williams; behind him it was just possible to make out the shadow of a boat against the water. 'Come along, the sooner we shove off the better.'

Matthew and Vera said goodbye to Dupigny and they wished each other luck. They shook hands. Matthew and Vera crossed the gang-plank followed by Williams. Dupigny waited to help them cast off and was just

stooping to do so when a powerful beam sprang out of the darkness and played over the launch, then fastened on Dupigny. The figures on the deck froze. The Australian corporal who was holding a lamp switched it on. It illuminated a ragged party of soldiers wearing Australian hats. One of them had a revolver, another a tommy-gun. There were about a dozen of them.

'Sorry, sports, we're taking the boat,' the man with the torch on Dupigny said. 'Hop it.'

Nobody moved or spoke. Dupigny, however, reached down for the mooring-rope to cast off. There was a shot and he began to hop about like a wounded bird, clutching his leg.

'Why don't you find your own bloody boat?' shouted the Australian corporal in a sudden rage.

'Hop it. You, too, cobber.'

'There's nothing for it, I'm afraid,' said Williams. One by one they came back over the gang-plank.

'Right now. Clear off and take him, too, before we do him in.'

They picked up Dupigny who had now fallen over and was struggling to get up again. He said he was not badly hurt but Matthew and Williams had to take his arms over their shoulders and support him; one leg of his cotton drill trousers was already soaked in blood. Speechless with anger and frustration they made their way wearily back across the aerodrome in the darkness.

From elsewhere on the Island other parties bent on escape were also groping about in the darkness. General Gordon Bennett found himself at the docks searching for a boat in which he might sail to Malacca in search of a bigger boat which in turn might carry him to Australia and freedom; he had thought it best not to mention his departure to the GOC and had left an inspiriting order for the Australian troops under his command to remain vigilantly at their posts … but in the meantime, where was that damn boat he needed?

As for Walter, he was making his way along a quay at Telok Ayer Basin where the *Nigel*, a handsome motor-yacht, was waiting for him and his companion, W. J. Bowser-Barrington. Poor Bowser-Barrington had fallen some way behind and was gasping under the tarpaulin-wrapped burden he carried on his shoulders. Bowser-Barrington was feeling anything but pleased, for his intention had been that Walter should carry this burden which consisted of his deceased Chairman who, though not a heavy man, was not a light one either. Walter, however, had flatly refused to have anything to do with carrying old Solomon's remains and had even gone so far as to recommend that Bowser-Barrington should simply throw his Chairman away somewhere. This, naturally, was altogether out of the question.

'Well,' thought Bowser-Barrington uneasily as he struggled along the quay in Walter's wake, 'once we're out at sea I'll show him who's boss.' Or rather … wait. Perhaps that was something he should discuss with the rest of the Board. Might it not be better to wait until they had reached Australia?

'Ahhhh!' He stumbled in the darkness and, as he did so, it was almost as if his Chairman deliberately ground his sharp knee painfully into his ear. But, of course, that was out of the question. 'Where are you, Walter?' he cried feebly into the darkness. 'I say, old boy, please don't leave me!'

Once Dupigny, whose wound fortunately had proved none too serious, had been returned to the Mayfair, Matthew had to consider what to do next. With only a few hours left before the Japanese occupation of the city it had become urgent to find a place where Vera might be able to lie low and conceal her identity. She needed a Chinese family willing to take the risk of hiding her, but neither Vera nor Matthew knew one. The Major suggested that they should ask Mr Wu. But Mr Wu was nowhere to be found. Either he had managed to escape during the early part of the night or else he, too, in danger as a former officer in the Chinese Air Force, had decided to lie low. Matthew and Vera wasted two precious hours in a vain search for Mr Wu. Such was the confusion in the city that nobody knew where anybody might be. As they made their way once again through the city centre Matthew gazed with envy at the troops who had stretched out to sleep on the pavements. By now both he and Vera were too tired to think constructively: they just wandered aimlessly, hand in hand, full of bitterness and discouragement as a result of their abortive attempt to escape and longing to be at peace.

At last, in desperation, they went to visit the tenement where Vera had lived before. The building was half deserted and there was no longer anyone sleeping on the stairs or in the corridors. Evidently many of those who had lived there formerly had moved to *kampongs* outside the city to avoid the bombing and shelling. Vera's little cubicle was still as she had left it. Nothing had been touched in her absence.

'You can't stay here. Someone in the building would inform on you sooner or later.'

'Where else is there to go?' Vera put a soothing hand on his shoulder. 'They're simple people here. They don't know about what happened in Shanghai.'

'They'll think you're suspicious. They'll have seen you with me.'

'They will just think I'm a prostitute. To them all Englishmen look alike,' she smiled wanly. 'Really, I shall be all right. I have been in a situation like this before.' She shrugged. 'Besides, we have no choice.' After she had rested her head against his shoulder for a little while in silence she said: 'You must go now, Matthew. It would be best if we weren't seen together any more. When you have gone I shall cut my hair and take off these European clothes.'

'Is there nothing else I can do for you? Let me give you some money, though it may no longer be any use

once the Japanese have taken over. Perhaps it would be best to buy some things tomorrow, then exchange them later when they get rid of our currency.'

Vera nodded and took the money. She began to weep quietly, saying: 'I'm sorry to be like this. I feel so tired, that's all. Tomorrow when I have slept I shall be all right.'

'We'll see each other again, won't we?'

'Yes, one day, certainly,' she agreed.

Early on Tuesday afternoon European civilians were at last marched off to Katong on the first stage of their long journey on foot to internment in Changi gaol. They had been assembled on the *padang* all morning under the tropical sun. Many of them were already suffering from the heat, weariness and thirst. The Major and Matthew walked one on each side of Dupigny who, despite his injury, insisted on walking by himself. Matthew carried a small bundle of Dupigny's belongings as well as a water bottle and a suitcase of his own. They walked in silence at first. The Major, in addition to his suitcase, carried a folded stretcher they had improvised, lest it should become necessary to carry Dupigny.

The ruined, baking streets stretched interminably ahead. In some of the shops they passed Matthew noticed that crude Japanese flags had already appeared. Dupigny noticed them, too, and said with a cynical smile: 'Well, Matthew, do you really believe that one day all races will decide to abandon self-interest and live together in harmony?'

'Yes, François, one day.'

They struggled on in the heat, stopping now and then to rest for a few moments in whatever shade they could find. Once, while they were resting, an elderly Chinese came out of a shop-house and offered them cigarettes from a round tin of Gold Flake, nodding and smiling at them sympathetically. They thanked him warmly and walked on, feeling encouraged.

The Chinese and Indians who had vanished from the streets after the surrender were beginning cautiously to reappear. By a row of burned-out shop-houses a group of young Indians had gathered to watch the column of Europeans as they straggled by. When Dupigny, limping painfully, came abreast of them they laughed and jeered at him. Delighted, he turned to smile ironically at Matthew.

'One day, François.'

They walked on. As time passed, Dupigny found it increasingly difficult to keep up with the others. His face was grey now and running with sweat. The Major insisted on having a look at his leg: his wound had opened again and his shoe was full of blood. He told the others to go on without him; he would get a lift from one of the Japanese vehicles which occasionally passed on the road. But the others considered this too risky. Ignoring his protests the Major unfolded the stretcher and made Dupigny lie down on it. Then he and Matthew picked up the stretcher and they went forward again, leaving their suitcases to volunteers in the column behind them; meanwhile, another volunteer searched through the column for a doctor, but presently he returned saying none could be found: it seemed that the doctors had been detained to look after the wounded in the city. They moved on once more: Dupigny seemed hardly to have the strength to brush the flies from his lips and eyes. They spread a handkerchief over his face to keep off the glare of the sun.

Time passed. At last Katong was no longer very far ahead. Dupigny lay with his eyes closed and seemed to be scarcely conscious. Again they passed a crowd of jeering Indians. Hearing them, Dupigny opened his eyes for a moment and his mouth twisted into a smile.

In the weeks, then months, then years that followed, first in Changi, later at the Sime Road civilian camp, Matthew found that his world had suddenly shrunk. Accustomed to speculate grandly about the state and fate of nations he now found that his thought were limited to the smallest of matters … a glass of water, a pencil, a handful of rice. Hope had deserted him completely. It came as a surprise to him to realize how much he had depended on it before.

In the first weeks after his internment, news began to filter into Changi of mass executions of Chinese suspected of having helped the British. 'Will all men still be brothers one day, Matthew?' asked Dupigny when he heard about these executions.

'I think so, François.' And Matthew shrugged sadly.

'Ah,' said Dupigny.

Many of the Chinese who were killed were towed out to sea in lighters and made to jump overboard, still bound together in twos and three. Others were machine-gunned wholesale on the beaches. According to the rumours which reached the camp, in every part of Singapore where Chinese lived they were forced by the Japanese to leave their houses at dawn and paraded in front of hooded informers. Matthew had a chilling vision of the scene … the hooded man, of whose face nothing could be seen but a glitter of eyes behind the mask, moving like Death along the row of waiting people, without explanation picking out now this person, now that. What chance would Vera have? No wonder hope had deserted him and that he preferred to restrict his thoughts to simple things. A glass of water, a pencil, a handful of rice.

But then one day in his second year of captivity, while he was out with a working party on the road, a young Chinese brushed up against him and pressed something into his hand. He looked at it surreptitiously: it

was a cigarette packet wrapped in a handkerchief. When he opened it he put his head in his hands: it contained a lump of sugar and two cooked white mice. And he thought: 'Well, who knows? At least there's a chance. Perhaps she'll survive after all, and so will I.'

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But more years pass and yet more. Let us suppose that Kate Blackett, now a woman with grown-up children of her own, is sitting at her breakfast-table in a quiet street in Bayswater. Kate has a pleasant, kindly, humorous look (as characters tend to have when their author treats them well) and this is an agreeable room she is having breakfast in: on the wall there is a charming painting by Patricia Moynagh of a curled-up cat, and a delightful, serene painting by Mary Newcomb of several people standing on a ferry, and another of a dog peacefully asleep surrounded by red flowers. Through the window, from where she is sitting, there is a glimpse of garden in which a cat is trying to catch butterflies … Or rather, no. Let us suppose that it is winter. Rub out the cat, erase the butterflies and let us move back inside where it is warmer.

Opposite Kate at the table is a man reading *The Times* for 10 December 1976. Kate can see nothing of this man (her husband, let us hope) but some grey hair on top of his head and two hands holding up the newspaper. Does he wear glasses? It is impossible to say. His face is hidden by the newspaper. The fingers which are holding it are long and slender and he is wearing a green sweater … (we can see part of its sleeve) and that is all there will be of him until he decides to put down the newspaper. Well, not quite all, however, for presently he speaks to Kate with a slight drawl. An Australian perhaps? From his voice he could be English, though, or even an American who has lived a long time in England. Perhaps, then, Kate has married Ehrendorf, that incorrigible Anglophile, who has at last come to his senses and realized which was the most attractive of the Blackett girls.

'Listen to this, Kate,' he says. 'Here's something that might interest a rubber tycoon's daughter: "Plantation work pays less than one dollar a day." From Our Correspondent, Geneva, 9 December. "Millions of workers on rubber, sugar, tea, cotton or coffee plantations are earning less than $1 (62p) a day, according to the International Labour Office." Let me see, what else does it say? Trade union rights … et cetera … malnutrition … disease .. Yes … "Many migrant workers on rubber or sugar plantations live in conditions of acute overcrowding. Sometimes there are up to 100 workers in one large room." Daily wage rates … And so on. There.'

Kate looks around the room vaguely but says nothing. Singapore seems very far away to her now, and no longer quite real … a magical place where she spent her childhood. Why, Malaya is no longer even called Malaya. Things that once seemed immutable have turned out to be remarkably vulnerable to change.

Or have they? That man behind the newspaper, if it were Ehrendorf, let us say, and if he happened to remember his arguments of years ago with Matthew about colonialism and tropical agriculture, might he not, as his eye was caught by that headline 'Plantation work pays less than one dollar a day', have said to himself that nothing very much had changed, after all, despite that tremendous upheaval in the Far East? That if even after independence in these Third World countries, it is *still* like that, then something has gone wrong, that some other, perhaps native, élite has merely replaced the British? If it *were* Ehrendorf might he not have recalled that remark of Adamson's (passed on to him by Matthew) about King William and the boatman who asked who had won the battle ('What's it to you? You'll still be a boatman.')?

But Ehrendorf, with his good manners, would surely have put down the newspapers by now or would at least have given part of it to Kate to read. Instead of which this individual has by now moved on to read about some other matter in some other part of the world, leaving Kate to gaze out of the window at the garden where it is suddenly summer again and a cat is trying to catch a butterfly. In any case …

In any case, there is really nothing more to be said. And so, if you have been reading in a deck-chair on the lawn, it is time to go inside and make the tea. And if you have been reading in bed, why, it is time to put out the light now and go to sleep. Tomorrow is another day, as they say, as they say.

Afterword

Among those works listed below which have been most valuable in this attempt to recreate the Far East of forty years ago I am particularly indebted to Professor P. T. Bauer's work on the rubber industry and especially to his classic report on smallholdings prepared for the Colonial Office in 1946 which, with J. S. Furnivall's *Colonial Policy and Practice*, first suggested to me another angle from which to consider the British Empire. The passage from *The Planter* in 1930 read by Matthew in the dying-house is quoted in Bauer, *The Rubber Industry*, p. 285. R. C. H. MacKie's *This Was Singapore*, the most evocative description of Singapore between the wars, also exerted a considerable influence on certain scenes. For Chinese love terminology I have relied chiefly on the fascinating *Yin Yang, The Chinese Way of Love* by Charles Humana and Wang Wu, though here and there I have been unable to resist taking a hand in it myself. Finally, no one could consider writing about the military campaign without making use of the outstanding work of the official historian, the late Major-General S. Woodburn Kirby.

Books apart, I am grateful to old Singapore hands, particularly Mrs Enid Sutton and Mr Richard Phelps, who have enlightened me about life there in those days, as well as to those inhabitants of modern Singapore who gave me their hospitality and help, especially Mr Nick Bridge of the New Zealand High Commission, and Mr Donald Moore. I would also like to thank: Mr Lacy Wright and Miss Thé-anh Cao who kindly showed me Saigon in the last few weeks before it became 'Ho Chi Minh City', Mr Ian Angus of King's College Library, London, my brother, Robert Farrell, of the University of Victoria Library, a constant source of good ideas and information, and Giorgio and Ginevra Agamben, from whom I first heard of the 'Singapore Grip'. Lastly, without a generous contribution from Booker McConnell Ltd for an earlier novel it would have been financially difficult for me to write this one.

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Biographical Notes

J. G. FARRELL (1935–1979) was born with a caul, long considered a sign of good fortune. Academically and athletically gifted, Farrell grew up in England and Ireland. In 1956, during his first term at Oxford, he suffered what seemed a minor injury on the rugby pitch. Within days, however, he was diagnosed with polio, which nearly killed him and left him permanently weakened. Farrell's early novels, which include *The Lung* and *A Girl in the Head*, have been overshadowed by his Empire Trilogy—*Troubles*, the Booker Prize-winning *Siege of Krishnapur*, and *The Singapore Grip* (all three are published by NYRB Classics). In early 1979, Farrell bought a farmhouse in Bantry Bay on the Irish coast. "I've been trying to write," he admitted, "but there are so many competing interests—the prime one at the moment is fishing off the rocks..... Then a colony of bees has come to live above my back door and I'm thinking of turning them into my feudal retainers." On August 11, Farrell was hit by a wave while fishing and was washed out to sea. His body was found a month later. A biography of J. G. Farrell, *J. G. Farrell: The Making of a Writer* by Lavinia Greacen, was published by Bloomsbury in 1999.

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JOHN BANVILLE was born in Wexford, Ireland, in 1945. He is the author of twelve novels, including *The Book of Evidence*, which was short-listed for the 1989 Booker Prize, *The Untouchable*, and *Eclipse*.

DEREK MAHON was born in Belfast in 1941, studied at Trinity College, Dublin, and the Sorbonne, and has held journalistic and academic appointments in London and New York. He has received numerous awards, including the *Irish Times*/Aer Lingus Poetry Prize, the Irish Academy of Letters Award, the Scott Moncrieff and Aristeion translation prizes, and Lannan and Guggenheim fellowships. His *Collected Poems* were published in 1999 and *Harbour Lights*, a volume of new poetry, is forthcoming in 2005.

PANKAJ MISHRA was born in North India in 1969 and now lives in London and India. He is the author of *The Romantics*, winner of the *Los Angeles Times's* Art Seidenbaum Award for First Fiction, and a frequent contributor to *The New York Review of Books, Granta*, and the *Times Literary Supplement*.

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THE EMPIRE TRILOGY

by J. G. Farrell

TROUBLES
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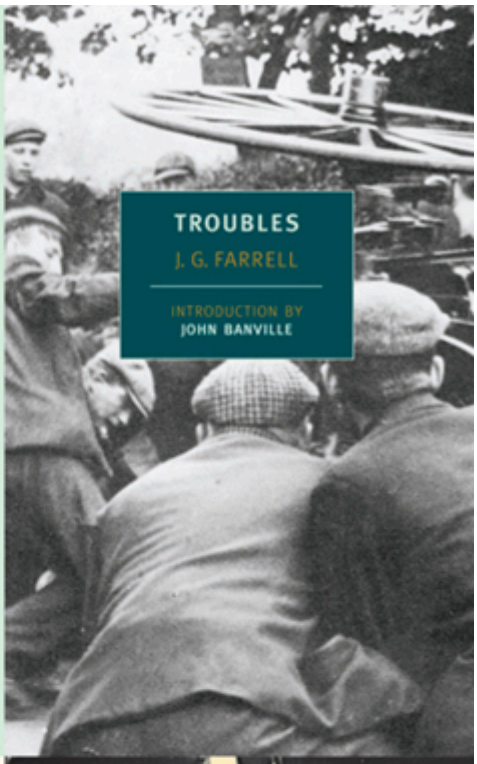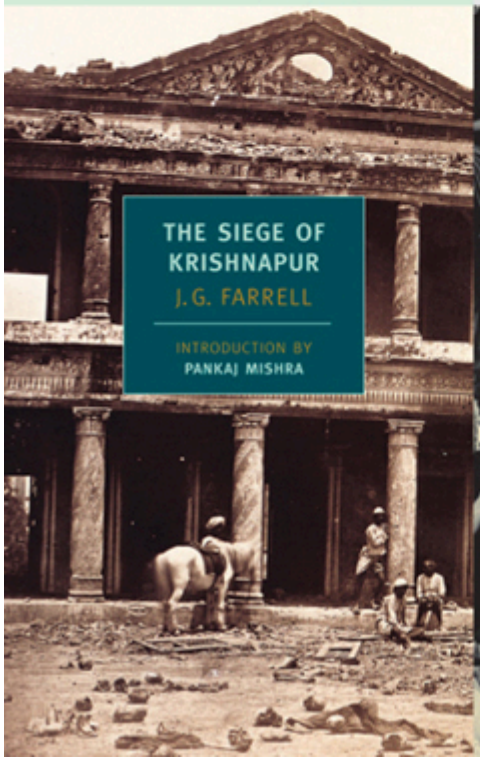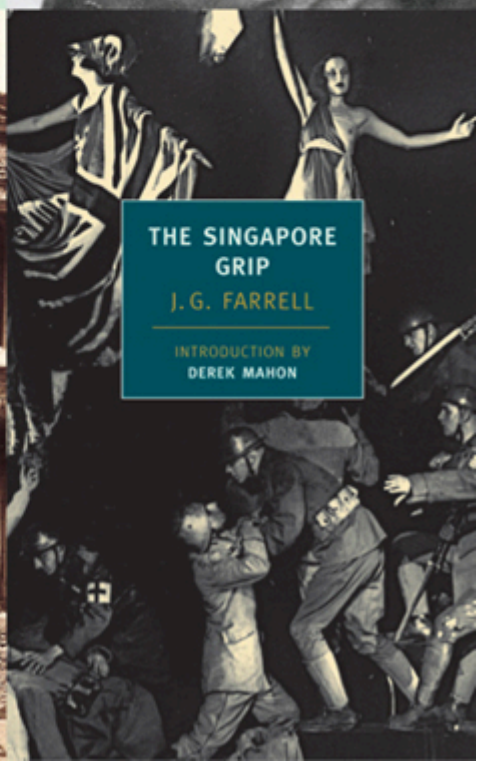
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